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ABSTRACT

This study examines the process through which the Commission on Public Secondary Schools of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC/CPSS) accredits the public high schools of New England. The commission is one of five that compose the association. Recent efforts of government agencies to hold schools accountable by testing performance against the new standards for school performance pose critical challenges to the accreditation process. The private agencies that accredit public schools must respond effectively to these challenges if public-school accreditation is to survive. Two central study questions emerge: (1) How does NEASC/CPSS accreditation work? and (2) How must it change to meet the challenges it faces in 1999? This study presents 41 findings about how accreditation works, and about the issues the commission now faces as it implements its new Statement of Purpose. Findings include results of six school visits carried out by NEASC/CPSS visiting teams, a comprehensive survey of the research literature about accreditation, extensive feedback about the initial study findings, and participant observation of two NEASC/CPSS working committees that revised both the standards and the self-study. Results indicate that accreditation is built upon peer judgments about how well schools meet peer-established standards. An appendix contains a report on the Foundations of the Catalpa School Visit. (DFR)

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Visiting Accreditation

Strengthening the Regional Accreditation Process

A Project of The LAB at Brown

A Report to the Commission on Public Secondary Schools
New England Association of Schools and Colleges

March 1999

Thomas A. Wilson, Ed.D.
Senior Research Associate

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Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory At Brown University (LAB)

The LAB, a program of The Education Alliance at Brown University, is one of ten federally supported educational laboratories in the nation. Our goals are to improve teaching and learning, advance school improvement, build capacity for reform, and develop strategic alliances with key members of the region's education and policy-making community.

The LAB develops educational products and services for school administrators, policymakers, teachers, and parents in New England, New York, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. Central to our efforts is a commitment to equity and excellence.

Information about LAB programs and services is available by contacting:

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Thomas A. Wilson is a Senior Research Associate at the LAB at Brown and Principal of Catalpa Ltd., the school visit organization.

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Northeast and Islands
Regional Educational Laboratory
A Program of The Education Alliance at Brown University

With

Catalpa, Ltd.

FOREWORD (SUGGESTED)

Visiting Accreditation is a report from the study on Strengthening the Accreditation Process, a project of the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University (the LAB).

This report is the result of a two-year, in-depth study of the accreditation process currently in use by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges/Commission on Public Secondary Schools (NEASC/CPSS). Since 95% of the public high schools in the six New England states are members of NEASC/CPSS and since they have voluntarily agreed to be part of the on-going accreditation process, the potential impact of this work on New England public high schools is unusually significant.

This study is part of the LAB's Initiative on Restructuring Secondary Schools. The LAB believes that the current practice of public secondary school accreditation has great potential for improving the quality of public education in New England.

The LAB was fortunate in retaining the services of Thomas A. Wilson to serve as the principal investigator for this multi-year project. Dr. Wilson is a recognized expert on the methodology of the school visit and on how the visit contributes to systems of public school accountability. Spanning thirty years, his work has focused on how to use research for improving the educational practice of public school practitioners.

The close working relationship between NEASC/CPSS and the LAB has made this study possible. This partnership is exemplary of the relationships the LAB seeks to forge with school practitioners and the organizations and agencies that define public education in the northeast region of the United States.

The LAB gratefully acknowledges the contributions that the Commission, its member schools and its visiting teams have made to this study.

We are confident that this document will meet the Commission's request for a report that will "provoke and support" its deliberations, as it considers how to strengthen its accreditation process so that it will best serve New England secondary schools. The LAB stands ready to provide continued support to NEASC/CPSS.

FOR THE LAB,

Phil Zarlengo,

Joe DiMartino

PREFACE

An amazing and unpredictable congruence of events made this study possible. In 1996 I had just finished a major study and book on traditional school inspection, as practiced for more than 150 years in Britain. I was looking for an opportunity to learn more about the practice, not the policy, of American school accountability to see if the assumptions behind the English approach could make a positive difference.

Pushed by many new codes of standards, American school reform was grappling with the simple belief that, if schools were held accountable for higher standards for student learning, they would improve. That led to the complex question of how to be certain that these standards would make a significant difference in the quality and rigor of what students learned. Public educators became absorbed with determining what must be done to make schools accountable.

At that same time the Commission on Public Secondary Schools of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges was strengthening its process of accreditation to meet its newly formulated Statement of Purpose.

Focusing particularly on the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse students, the LAB at Brown had just been established to promote school improvement that would result in all learners achieving excellence. Committed to collaborative inquiry as a strategy, it was building ties with those directly working to provide educational services in the northeast region, which includes all New England states.

This study began in January 1997, when my interests converged with those of NEASC/CPSS and the LAB. The LAB agreed to make this work possible. During the last two years, this three-way relationship has paid off in surprising ways.

The LAB provided me with an effective organizational context in which to work. It provided me with necessary and competent administrative support. My colleagues there had the wisdom to know when to prod and when not to prod. I am particularly grateful to Joe DiMartino and Karen Weller, my main connections at the LAB, for their continuing thoughtful counsel. Phil Zarlengo, Juan Lopez, Nancy Levitt-Vieira, Ezzy Lopez, Rita Paliotta, Pat Doyle and several others provided the necessary administrative support. Tonya Whitman did a yeoman's job on the bibliography. Joe DiMartino, Gwen Jordan and Karen Weller each made important contributions in developing the substance of the study.

The Commission became a vital partner. The ideas and issues of this study are firmly rooted in the wisdom of its tradition, as well as in the reality of its century-long history and its current situation. The Commission's Board invited me to several of its quarterly meetings as a guest so I could see first hand how it worked. A major component throughout was the thoughtful, practical and lively discussion of Commission members, Commission staff and the teachers and principals of member schools.

This study would not have been possible and its potential would never have been realized without the cooperation, openness and involvement of the Commission members, its staff, and its member schools. Alan Bookman and Albert Miller, Chairs of the Commission during this study, took a special and thoughtful interest in its conduct. Commission members John Deasy and Robert Fraser participated in interview-discussions on particular points that are important to this study. Robert Mackin, Chair of the Standards Review Committee, and Jacqueline G. Soychak, Chair of the Self-Study Development Committee, provided important input on specific study issues.

Vincent Ferrandino, Executive Director and CEO of NEASC; Janet Allison, Associate Director of the NEASC/CPSS; Joseph Daisy, Associate Director NEASC/CPSS; and Roberta Knight, Secretary to the Director NEASC/CPSS, offered thoughtful explanations and comments on the substance of this study and helpful suggestions on its logistics. The support and substantive contributions of Pamela Gray-Bennett, Director of the Commission, were essential to the conduct and analysis of this study.

While there were no formal ties, the work of this study was related to my work on the school visit with the School Accountability for Learning and Teaching (SALT) initiative at the Rhode Island Department of Education. As a result, this study owes thanks to the Commissioner, Deputy Commissioner, the SALT Leadership team, and the schools and team members who made up SALT during this period.

Finally, I owe thanks to my wife Leslie Oh for her skillful editing and wise sustenance.

Full acknowledgement of the organizations and individuals who contributed to this study is presented in Appendix A.

This work with NEASC/CPSS has been fascinating. Although I know this report is far from perfect, this work has contributed so much to my knowledge of the school visit and its place in American education that I find it easy to accept responsibility for any of its short-comings and mistakes.

I would like *Visiting Accreditation* to be helpful to the Commission and others, who are struggling with the issues of school accountability and improvement in New England public schools. Hopefully, this study will succeed in enhancing the understanding of the value and practice of

accreditation. Hopefully, this report will inform the continuing thoughtful discussion of the Commission about its present situation and the decisions it needs to make to strengthen the value of accreditation for its member schools and the public.

Thomas A. Wilson
Catalpa Ltd.
January 1999

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study examines the process through which the Commission on Public Secondary Schools of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC/CPSS) accredits the public high schools of New England. In this era of heightened interest in standards for public schools and systems of school accountability, it makes sense to understand how accreditation as the oldest and most traditional of the standards-based systems of accountability actually works.

The Commission is one of five that comprise the Association. Through these commissions, the Association accredits approximately 1,800 New England institutions of learning including colleges, universities, independent K-12 schools, public elementary, public middle, public secondary and vocational-technical schools. Established as a private, non-profit, membership organization, the Association has no formal organizational relationship to any school district or state department of education.

It is ironic that school accreditation has received so little serious attention from the education research community. While most people want their children to attend an accredited school, they have little notion of what being accredited actually means. The education research community most often portrays it as a naïve procedure that lacks rigor, consequences and impartiality. Most of these conclusions reveal misconceptions and lack of knowledge about how accreditation works and what value it brings to public education.

Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the recent intensification of using government agencies (state departments, and school districts) to hold schools accountable by testing the performance of their students against the new standards for school performance poses critical challenges to accreditation. The private agencies that accredit public schools must respond effectively to these challenges, if public school accreditation is to survive.

From within this context two central study questions emerged:

> How does NEASC/CPSS accreditation work?
>
> How must it change to meet the challenges it faces in 1999?

To answer those questions the nontraditional design of this study combined elements of basic research design with elements of interactive, applied research.

This study presents 41 findings about how accreditation works, and about the issues the Commission now faces as it implements its new Statement of Purpose.

The comprehensive evidence base for the findings took two years to develop. It includes careful observation of six full school visits carried out by NEASC/CPSS visiting teams, a comprehensive survey of the research literature about accreditation, extensive feedback about the initial study findings, and participant observation of two NEASC/CPSS working committees that revised both the standards and the self-study.

In summary form, these are the most important study findings:

> NEASC/CPSS accreditation is built upon peer judgments about how well schools meet peer-established standards. The nature of these standards and the process used by the Commission to decide whether a school adheres to them varies significantly from the standards and processes used by government agencies to hold schools accountable.
>
> The accreditation visit, the "signature event of accreditation," is built upon a methodology for knowing schools. The Commission's acceptance of this major finding about the nature of the visit will not only provide a strong platform to strengthen the rigor of the visit, but to strengthen the whole accreditation process as well.
>
> The current (1997) self-study must be overhauled, if it is to become an important tool for school improvement.
>
> To implement its central function of "serving the public interest" the Commission must greatly strengthen its public voice.
>
> The steps the Commission has taken in response to the challenge are consistent with its Statement of Purpose and have built potential for success. To take advantage of this potential, the Commission must now revise its visit protocol and develop a bold strategy to strengthen its public voice.

This is the primary report of the study. *Visiting Accreditation Supplement: Source-of-Evidence Documents* presents additional documents that have served as major parts of the evidence base for this study.

Note on Sources-of-Evidence and citations:

References indicated by SE # "*n*" refer to the sources of evidence which are described in the section of this report entitled, *Sources of Evidence.*

Documents directly cited are listed in *Cited References,* which appears just before the Appendix.

CONTEXT, QUESTIONS AND DESIGN

The roots of this study are intertwined with the tradition, responsibilities and work of the Commission on Public Secondary Schools of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC/CPSS). In the last seven years the deliberations and actions of the Commission have been unusually important. Its deliberate sense of purpose and the intensity and thoughtfulness of its discussions lead one to the conjecture that something historic may be happening that will have an important effect on New England secondary schools, and possibly American public education.

Because of this potential, it is critical to set this study carefully within the tradition of the issues that have shaped NEASC/CPSS and its accreditation process. The *Context* of this study is divided into four parts: Organization, History, Issues and Challenges. It is followed by the *Study Questions*, which lead to the study *Design*.

THE CONTEXT

The Current Organization of the Association and the Commission

In 1952 NEASC became the accrediting agency for New England's colleges and universities, and its public and independent schools. A school or college becomes a member when, based on a self-study and the report of a team of peers that visits the institution, the appropriate Commission of the Association judges that the institution adheres to its set of standards. Five current Commissions are defined by the category of the institutions each one accredits: Institutions of Higher Education, Independent Schools, Public Secondary Schools, Technical and Career Schools and Public Elementary Schools.

The Commission on Public Secondary Schools (NEASC/CPSS) is the largest of the commissions. In 1997 its 689 member schools represented almost 95% of all New England public high schools. The 26 Commission (Board) members, who meet quarterly, represent the member schools and their school systems. Currently 18 seats are filled by high school administrators, three by middle school administrators and three by central office administrators. One public representative and one teacher complete the membership.

Like the four other NEASC commissions, NEASC/CPSS is responsible for defining the standards for accreditation for its member schools and for developing, implementing and reviewing its accreditation process to

determine whether a school adheres to those standards. Three full-time professional staff and six-support staff carry out the directives and decisions of the Commission, including managing the logistics and professional support for 70 school reviews a year. The staff builds its visiting teams from a pool of 14,000 school practitioners, comprised of those who have served on a visiting team before or who have indicated an interest in serving. In addition, the staff completes the preparation of 450-500 school reports for Commission action each year (e.g., two-year, five-year and special progress reports).

The History that Defined NEASC/CPSS Accreditation

For one hundred and fourteen years the deliberations and decisions of the Commission on Secondary Schools of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC/CPSS) have been important for New England schools. The history of the Association and the Commission provided an intriguing backdrop for this study. It explained the current organizational structure of the Commission and identified three important issues that are historically imbedded in its continuing deliberation about its purpose and process.

The following all too brief representation of the history pinpoints events that are key to both the Commission and/or its member schools.[1]

While there must have been important earlier discussions, the first recorded event in NEASC history took place in 1885. At that first meeting Charles Eliot, President of Harvard University, and Cecil F. P. Bancroft, Principal of Phillips Academy, Andover, joined, as individuals, with several other leaders of New England colleges and college preparatory schools to found the association that later became NEASC.[2] They might not have met again, if they had known that in 1909, after "25 years of honorable and useful service" that the Executive Committee would call for a revitalization of NEASC's purpose and function:

---

[1] The written record of the history of the Association is quite limited. While I have been careful in what I present, the limits of this study made it impossible to do the checking that would make this an authoritative account. I am indebted to John Stoops for the history of American accreditation (Stoops 1998); and to Betram Holland for the history of the Association up to 1985, based on the minutes of the Association's Executive Committee and annual meetings. (Holland 1986). For Commission history since 1985, I have relied on oral accounts of NEASC/CPSS staff.

[2] Then President of Brown University, E.G. Robinson, was also in this group and became the Association's first Vice-President. This began Brown's active involvement in the Association that echoed again when Brown's new President, E. Gordon Gee, gave the keynote speech at the 1998 Association's Annual Meeting.

> The Executive Committee ... begs leave to call the attention of all the members of the Association to the urgent need of effort to make the future of the organization equal to its opportunity. (Holland 1986, p 23)

While the record is not explicit, this call was most likely a scolding for opportunities lost during that first 25 years. At that very first meeting in 1885 Eliot and Bancroft proposed creating a board of colleges and preparatory schools to examine high school graduates. (Holland 1986, p. 15) Ten years later, as the Association was still unresponsive to his proposal, Eliot went to another new organization in Princeton, New Jersey, which later became the Middle States Association. Recognizing the possibilities in his request, that organization launched the College Entrance Examination Board in 1899, which has been one of the most powerful shapers of American secondary education during the last century. (SE # 7c)[3]

Meanwhile the New England Association held annual meetings, where papers were delivered on topics of interest, including the merits of certification—the scheme that countered an individual exam system. Certification meant that colleges would "certify" preparatory schools, meaning their graduates were "certified" for college admission.

The minutes of Association meetings indicate that the members had many lively discussions about other topics, such as, "Should *Homer* be taught in the preparatory school?" In 1887 Brown University Professor William G. Poland reported on the work of a committee that was considering college entrance exams. The committee's analysis included the point that the "the immaturity and inferiority of American youth ... was almost universally admitted and deplored—the causes being thought by many to be very deep in the American character and social conditions." It is not surprising where this analysis led: "No remedy was suggested." (Holland 1986, p 18)

There are no records of Association meetings between 1891 and 1909. It isn't clear whether the Association did not meet, whether the records disappeared or whether they might have been destroyed. But it is no wonder that in 1909 the Executive Committee made its "urgent call for action." The Association's past lack of effort had resulted in many lost opportunities. The 25-year-old Association faced critical issues that offered no shortage of opportunities.

The 1909 call succeeded to some extent. Meetings became regular and the records of them indicated a growing organization. The most persistent discussion for the next 33 years was about educational standards, accreditation and the basis of membership in the Association.

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[3] SE numbers refer to the sources of evidence for this study. They are fully explained on page 38.

The idea of accreditation was born at a University of Michigan faculty meeting in 1871. John Stoops, former Director of the Middle States Association/Commission on Elementary School, credits Professor A.S. Whitney, University of Michigan Professor, who wrote in a 1902 paper:

> The accrediting system ... sprang from two apparent antagonistic causes: First, from an earnest desire of the (university) to cooperate with ... the high schools with a view to consolidating, strengthening and evaluating the entire system of the state;
>
> and
>
> Secondly, ... to the end that each institution (university and school) might react on and stimulate the other for the benefit of each and the good of the whole. (Stoops 1998, p. 5)

This tension between "evaluating" and "collaborating" is also present in the history of English school inspection. It became a defining issue for both English inspection and the accreditation systems, suggesting that it is a critical dimension to be considered in any scheme for assessing the performance of public schools.[4]

The first accreditations were carried out by college faculty members, who visited each school unannounced to decide whether the preparation of its students met the colleges' standards for admission. If so, the school was accredited.

By 1902 the idea of accreditation had spread throughout the Midwest. With the exception of New England, it was fast becoming the dominant system for legitimizing the value of high schools in all sections of the country. In 1919 the Executive Committee of the Association directed that a Committee on Standards for the Secondary Schools be established. That is when the Association began discussing whether NEASC should promote standards and then use an accreditation process to ascertain whether or not the schools had met them.

It was difficult to define how such a change would affect the definition of membership in the Association. Should the basis shift from individuals to institutions? Should an evaluation of an institution's adherence to the set standards become the criterion? Would the institutions, where the existing members belonged, be subject to the same continuous accreditation review as the new applicants for membership?

These deliberations continued for 30 years. In 1952 the issue of evaluating the institutions affiliated with the existing Association finally was resolved. The pressure was mounting for schools to become accredited. When they

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[4] Wilson 1996, pp. 165-168.

finally threatened to look elsewhere, the New England Association finally decided to join the rest of the country and adopt accreditation.

NEASC was never to be the same. It became a voluntary, private (not public), member- and practitioner-based organization that was devoted to overseeing and managing the process of the accreditation of its members. Furthermore, its membership had irrevocably changed from individual representatives to the represented institutions themselves. These decisions required the re-evaluation of what to do about the continuing membership of existing members. Grandfathering would not work in the new order.

Many more professional staff were employed to carry out the complex activities associated with accreditation.

The 1952 decision created the purpose and shaped the structure of the Commission on Public Secondary Schools, as we now know it.[5]

There is one other defining moment in the history of the Association that is important to this study. At its December 1960 meeting, the Association accepted a statement put forth by William Fels, President of Bennington College, "*That the standards are qualitative.*" Betram Holland described the importance of this declaration this way:

> This was a landmark statement, a succinct declaration of the philosophy of accreditation that the Executive Committee had been groping for ever since the decision was reached to evaluate institutional members. Dr. Fels might well be called the Thomas Jefferson of this declaration. Whereas other regional accrediting associations stressed *quantitative* factors in deciding whether to include or exclude institutions, the New England Association came down hard for *qualitative* considerations. It was not long after the adoption of this official *Statement Regarding Institutional Membership* that the Commission on Public Secondary Schools voted to eliminate the previous requirement that schools in its jurisdiction fill out the charts and graphs giving numerical values to ratings in the *Evaluative Criteria* used for self evaluation. (Holland 1986, p. 85)

This statement was seen to distinguish the Association from the other regional associations. As will be discussed in the next section, this commitment to qualitative standards remains a central defining point for NEASC/CPSS today.

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[5] The actual creation of the Commission on Public Secondary Schools can be traced back to 1927, when the Association created a standing committee on Public Secondary Schools.

Three Background Issues from the Commission's Tradition

Three important issues to this study are based in this history:

> Why is it important to the Commission to describe standards as qualitative?
>
> How can the Association serve its members and at the same time serve the public interest?
>
> Why didn't the Association speak out?

Issue One: Qualitative standards

The distinction between qualitative and quantitative standards first appeared in the written record in the Association's "landmark statement" of 1960. While the Association has used the term "qualitative standards" to distinguish itself from the other regional associations, it now more frequently uses the term to explain how NEASC/CPSS is different from state department accountability. For many within the Commission this "qualitative" aspect of NEASC/CPSS standards is what distinguishes accreditation and gives it value.

What is a "qualitative standard?" Why is the distinction between qualitative and quantitative so important? These terms were first contrasted in the debates about educational research methods in the sixties. This contrast probably originated in the debate about how to best conduct education program evaluation. The dominant strategy for education reform in that era was to introduce new programs into schools and then evaluate their effects on students to determine whether they were more successful than existing practice. Critics said this approach to change was too quantitative, that it missed important contextual explanations, that schools and learning are both more complex than a simple model of cause-and-effect suggests. Anthropologists and other field researchers entered the discussion, supporting the legitimacy of qualitative research methods.

NEASC/CPSS was more concerned about ending its thirty-year discussion about membership and establishing its relatively new standards-based accreditation process, than about entering the research/policy community's debates. While it may be interesting to speculate why Dr. Fels used the term, "qualitative," it is even more interesting to wonder why he tied it to standards and not to accreditation. Why didn't he say, "Accreditation is a qualitative method?"

While several explanations are possible, the best one is that the Association had come to define accreditation as an enterprise of standards. While the notion of standards for schools is common today, it wasn't at that time. In addition, the question of using standards for schools had already sparked a

40-year long debate within the Association. The Commission now saw its main task as creating standards for schools and then monitoring school adherence to them. The rest of the process followed directly from the standards. The Commission did not, and still does not, consider accreditation, or its elements, as a method of inquiry that can be labeled either "quantitative" or "qualitative." Accreditation was simply what NEASC commissions did. At its heart it was an administrative process, not an inquiry.

The study findings consider accreditation as a method—a method that is shaped by the inquiry nature of the accreditation visit. There is a strong case that accreditation is at heart a method of inquiry, not a process. The findings ignore whether the method is qualitative or quantitative; they present it as a practitioner's way to know schools.

Issue two: Serving members and serving the public interest

As will be detailed fully in the next section, the new approaches of government agencies to school accountability profoundly challenge both the Commission and accreditation. This challenge has made the Commission rethink whether "serving the public interest" should be an important part of its organizational purpose and function. The 1996 Statement of Purpose explicitly sets serving the public interest at the center of the Commission's rationale.

The history of NEASC/CPSS may make the meaningful implementation of this central focus difficult. How the Commission defines and acts out its relationship to its members has been at the core of Commission life for the last hundred years. That relationship has shaped the nature and practice of accreditation in important ways. While the question about the implications of accreditation for member schools, particularly those who are already members, has slipped away, three new questions have emerged:

> As a private, regional, peer-based association, how can NEASC/CPSS best serve the public interest?
>
> Since the public interest requires better public schools, how can accreditation become more effective, as an instrument of school improvement?
>
> How does attending to the public interest and school improvement change the way NEASC/CPSS relates to its members?

The Commission's success in serving the public interest will depend on how well the way it does that also enhances its service to its members. Member schools may have to come to see that they also function in the public interest

and that as members of NEASC/CPSS they are more effective in both serving and in deriving the benefits of that service.

The study includes findings about the Commission's role in the public interest, as well as its role in school improvement.

Issue three: The Commission's voice

The Commission has not informed the public, nor stimulated its curiosity, about the nature of accreditation. It has not described accreditation so that most people know what it means. It has not tried to inform parents, or educators or policy makers what it knows about standards, good practices or the dynamics of effective school change.

On matters of public voice the Commission is obligated to proceed in a manner that is consistent with the Association. The Association's deliberate public silence, except when defending an action that has been challenged in the public arena, is based in its conviction that its first responsibility is to its members, not the public.

It is arguable that, if the Commission and Association had spoken out more loudly and clearly about accreditation and what it knows about New England schools, the public would have a broader understanding of the process of accreditation and a deeper understanding of its value. That understanding might have reduced the current threat.

This study presents findings about the Commission's public voice.

The New Challenge of Accountability

NEASC/CPSS accreditation is under the most serious external challenge in its history. Government agencies have strengthened their day-to-day positions with schools by setting standards and by requiring schools to be accountable for their students' performance. For the first time in the history of American education someone other than the accrediting associations is using standards to judge schools. But the relationship of government agencies to the schools is profoundly different. The schools report to them and depend on them for their funding and support. Schools must pay attention to them. They don't have to pay nearly as much regard to an association that they voluntarily join.

Many of the circumstances and issues that defined accreditation, when the Association adopted it in 1952, have changed substantially:

- Standardized entrance exams have become the basis for students being accepted into most institutions of higher education. This makes the original purpose of accreditation less compelling.

- Standardized tests of student achievement have spread throughout the public school system, widely becoming the accepted basis for measuring how well schools do. The increase in the accepted value of testing has diminished the perceived legitimacy of accreditation, particularly among researchers and policy makers.
- Powerful voluntary associations within education have emerged (e.g. principals, school boards, special services, and disciplines), which represent narrower professional interests than that of the original association.
- At the same time, the general public's view that accreditation is a necessary stamp of school approval has grown stronger.

The rise of government agency accountability (GAA), which holds codes of standards and testing at its core, challenges the relevance of NEASC/CPSS, as an organization of member schools. This challenge becomes even more serious because the Association and the Commission have not paid close enough attention to how the ground upon which it was founded has changed.

Stimulated by the school reform movement, the 1990s brought a new and remarkable cohesion to the public view that public schools can and must improve student learning. That cohesion was followed by a public demand that the government school funding agencies had a public responsibility to hold them accountable for student performance.

The characteristic approach of GAA is to: (1) Create a set of codified standards about what students should know and what they should be able to do; (2) Test student performance against the standards; and (3) Couple school results with clear consequences for the school. In this way, it is believed, schools would be coerced into delivering better teaching and student learning.

GAA amassed considerable support from federal and local government agencies, university policy groups and business interests. While accreditation has seldom been explicitly attacked, the proponents of GAA clearly view it as an anachronism. The major pieces of their informal critique are:

> The accreditation process lacks rigor and objectivity in its method of collecting and analyzing data.
>
> Since state educational agencies are increasing their efforts to set standards and to measure school performance against them, NEASC/CPSS accreditation is an expensive overlap.
>
> Since accreditation is voluntary and since it uses public funds, it should go.
>
> The requirement that schools conduct a two-year self-study once every 10 years is a luxury of a by-gone era. Modern self-study is a valuable

> tool for school improvement, but it must quickly lead the school to planned and continuous action. The current NEASC/CPSS self-study involves too much of a school's limited time; it forces a school to jump over unnecessary hurdles; it does not recognize that funding agencies require schools to conduct other self-studies and adopt school improvement schemes.
>
> The voluntary accrediting associations do not have the backbone to make tough accountability decisions. Given their voluntary membership structure, it may be impossible for them to be tougher. As the government agencies control financial resources, they can provide major incentives and disincentives for schools to improve. A voluntary organization cannot make tough decisions about its members' competence, because those decisions might threaten their membership status in the organization. Since that would not serve their obvious interest, many would leave and the organization would fade away.

In this view, accreditation lacks rigor and objectivity. Furthermore the Associations lack the leverage to affect change in their member schools, because the membership is voluntary. These arguments relay the message that the real work of accountability must be left to the bureaucracies that have the power and expertise to manage it.

These views demonstrate a considerable lack of knowledge about the current accreditation process, and a disregard for its public legitimacy, which is probably greater than that of GAA systems. Furthermore, the critics miss what could be learned from the Associations' grappling with the central issues of public education in the 20th century, specifically the application of standards to school performance. Most damaging, through ignorance they misconstrue the very nature of the accreditation process.

The irony of the criticism is striking. There is no solid basis for believing that GAA will improve the learning performance of schools. The historical evidence from the most comprehensive national use of this approach offers contrary evidence: In the late 1800s the British government launched such a program on a nationwide basis. The government set performance objectives (what we now call the "three Rs"), monitored student performance, and tied school performance to financial consequences. Judged a policy failure after thirty difficult years, it faded away.

Whatever vulnerability GAA may have, the irony is that its proponents, who usually argue from a research base, have dismissed accreditation without trying to understand what they dismiss or how it might inform the discussion about how to best improve schools.

For more than 100 years accreditation has been based on using standards to determine school performance. In comparison GAA is a newcomer to the

school standards movement. Accreditation has value in the public eye (including real estate brokers). In New England, at least, it leads to real public action on behalf of schools—something most GAA systems seek. Accreditation is built upon thousands of school practitioners, who volunteer to participate in a rather arduous experience. Their testimonials indicate that whatever happens during the process is more valuable than is usually recognized.

This study began with the assumption that accreditation has value. Its first task is to understand how accreditation actually works in practice. From that understanding, it becomes possible to make a more reasonable assessment of its value and to shape its future in response to the challenges it faces.

The Commission's Response to the Challenge

While GAA may threaten the survival of NEASC/CPSS, it presents a challenge worthy of the 1909 call. It requires NEASC/CPSS to make the "necessary effort" to "make its future equal to its opportunity."

NEASC/CPSS began responding to the GAA challenge in 1991, several years before this study began.

In 1991 the Commission began to require schools to reach a higher level of adherence to the standards in order to be accredited. The Commission also paid more attention to deficiencies in the quality of education provided by its member schools. Before, when the Commission took negative action, it was most likely because of a deficiency in a school building or the financial support of a school. At this same time the Commission became more exact about what it required from school follow-up reports.

As a result of this tougher stance, more schools were terminated, placed on warning and/or probation than at any other time in the Commission's history. The accreditation of three schools was terminated. The decision to terminate accreditation from another member school resulted in a court injunction.

The 1992 regular review of Commission standards resulted in important changes in the standards in the direction of sharpening their focus on schools as institutions with a central function—teaching and learning.

In 1996 the Regional Laboratory at Andover conducted an exploratory study on how schools perceived the value of the accreditation process. They were generally favorable about the changes.

In 1996 the Commission adopted its first formal Statement of Purpose. At its September 1996 meeting it was asked to approve a draft, which spelled out what member schools would be required to do. The Commission approved the draft, stipulating that a section be added to spell out what it would do. The

current statement contains both sections. (See Figure # 1. This version reflects these changes.)

The NEASC/CPSS Leadership Council contemplated how to conduct the next round of standards review, scheduled to begin in 1997, to forward the emphases of the new Statement of Purpose.

The Commission Director expressed interest in the possibility in a later study on how the current process of accreditation fit and furthered its Statement of Purpose. The current study was charged to "provoke and support" the Commission's continuing deliberations by presenting a coherent view of the tangle of issues it now faces.

The findings of this study on the Commission's response are included in this report.

CPSS STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

CPSS and its membership serve the public interest by requiring that accredited schools maximize learning for all students by meeting identified standards.

Member schools and their communities accomplish this by:

- conducting a self-study
- hosting a visiting committee that determines a school's adherence to identified Standards for Accreditation
- maintaining adherence to the Standards through a proactive and on-going school improvement process which includes, in part, the implementation of valid recommendations
- providing accurate follow up reports to the Commission as required

CPSS accomplishes this by:

- promoting the investigation and implementation of best educational practice based on current research
- reviewing and determining schools' accreditation status based on their adherence to Commission Standards
- educating and providing professional support for schools throughout the accreditation process
- providing opportunities for professional staff involvement on CPSS visiting and other committees and related work at member schools
- involving member school educators in the review and revision of Commission Standards
- modeling a culture of self-reflection, collaboration and inquiry by reviewing Commission Standards and the accreditation process
- utilizing information about member schools' adherence to the Standards to inform change internally and externally

Mission

STUDY QUESTIONS

The questions that NEASC/CPSS asked this study to address come from this context. Tied to the 1996 Statement of Purpose, they are perceived to be important to the Commission's future:

- What issues does the new Statement of Purpose raise for the Commission?
- Can the standards and the process of accreditation become more compelling to ensure that its member schools will "maximize learning for all students?"
- Can the process more effectively support member schools in "maintaining a proactive and on-going school improvement process?"
- Can a more rigorous and legitimate process result in public statements about the condition of a school in relation to the standards?
- Can the Commission further its service to the public by providing more information and by taking a more proactive stance in the public discussion?

This study was charged to generate (1) Findings on the character and quality of the existing accreditation process and (2) Findings that would "provoke and support" the Commission's ongoing deliberations on the design and conduct of accreditation.

DESIGN

The first order of business was to shape the NEASC/CPSS charge and these study questions into an operational design to clearly ensure this study 's legitimacy, utility and efficiency. Based on emerging knowledge about the issues and on practical logistical matters, the design had to allow for continual refinements that would not compromise its legitimacy.

Many educational researchers build quasi-experimental designs to test out their working assumptions about the processes under question. To satisfy the requirement for precision in variables that would allow meaningful numeric measurement, they would have had to define accreditation and its impacts in operational terms.

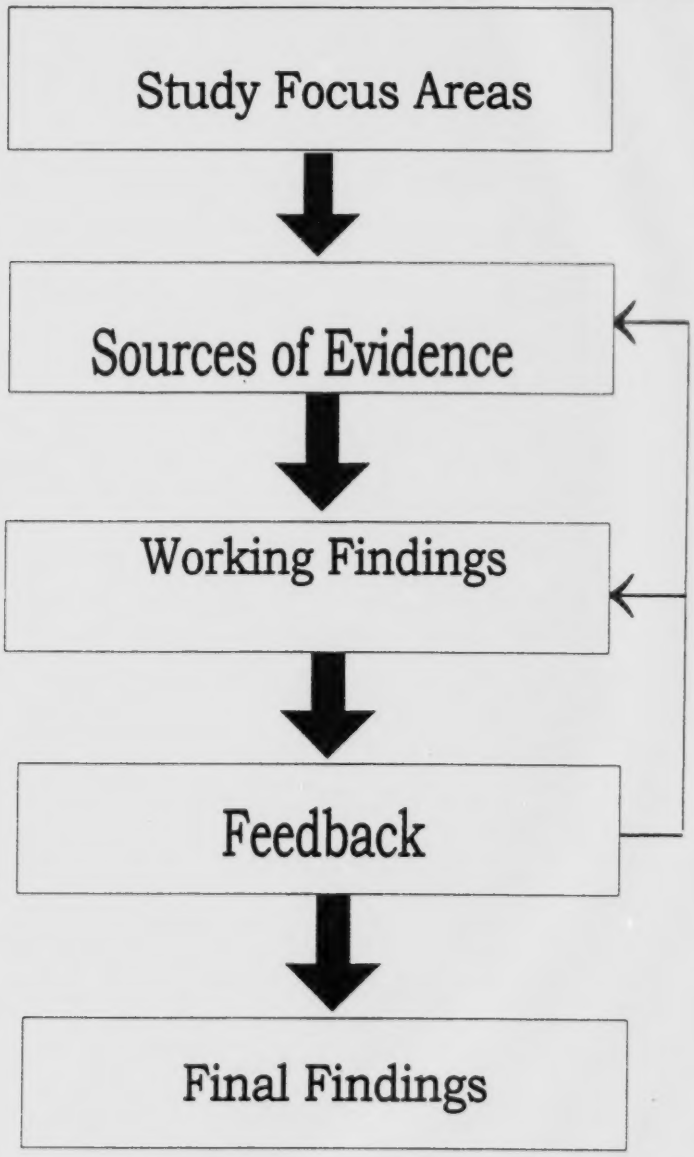
Such a design was not appropriate for this study. Because it would focus on actual practice about which there was little past research, the design of this study contains elements that are more like those for basic or exploratory research. Because this study would include significant interactions with NEASC/CPSS to check its findings and to inform the Commission, the design contains elements that are more like applied research.

The first purpose was not to measure and report on the effects of the current process, but to understand how that process takes place. That understanding would then become the basis for considering how well the process forwards the Commission's Statement of Purpose. Second, to ensure that its findings would be coherent and useful to the Commission, this study sought to consider the social and intellectual context of the NEASC/CPSS accreditation process in 1998.

Since the accreditation visit is the signature feature of NEASC/CPSS accreditation, this study would begin with observations of six full accreditation school visits. Then it would consider the complete accreditation process, as practiced in 1997.

The elements and methods were then carefully designed to meet the real research issues and practical questions faced by this study. This approach to research design is consistent with the LAB's requirement for "re-thinking the traditional ways that research designs are developed," in order to build a substantive collaborative inquiry that supports educational reform and will make a difference for all American children (LAB Proposal 1996 p. 57). While the implications of this approach to this study design and the reciprocal contribution of this study to the LAB's approach is a potentially valuable discussion, it is outside the range of this report.

THE ELEMENTS OF THE STUDY



Working Questions

The following working questions for this study were built from the Commission's charge and from the study questions:

1. **What is the nature of the accreditation visit, as it is practiced, and how does it relate to the rest of the accreditation process?**

2. **What changes in the process will increase the focus of the schools on teaching and learning?**

3. **What changes in the process will better support school improvement?**

4. **What changes in the process will improve its rigor?**

5. **How can NEASC/CPSS strengthen its voice in the public discussion about how to improve the quality of New England public schools?**

6. **How can NEASC/CPSS best respond to its challenges and assure its continuation as an important organization for New England public school accountability?**

Study Focus Areas

The above working questions defined what needed to be studied and, thus, guided the selection of the focus areas of this study. *The Focus Areas* and the *Sources of Evidence* follow.

Unlike preliminary hypotheses in an experimental design, the focus areas of this study did not control the inquiry. By defining the areas in which findings must be drawn and reported, they define the scope and kind of evidence that must be collected. It was recognized that evidence collected over the course of this study might generate better questions and sharper definitions of the focus areas. Some definitions did change. *The* focus areas of this study are presented here in their final form. They are divided between those that include **Findings on the Character and Quality of the 1997 Accreditation Process** and those that include **Findings to Provoke and Support the Commission.**

Findings on the Character and Quality of the 1997 Accreditation Process

1. History and Institutional Context
2. The Accreditation School Visit
3. The Self-Study
4. Decision Making
5. Follow-Up
6. The Commission's Public Voice

Findings to "Provoke and Support the Commission"

7. The Effectiveness of the 1998 Review Process
8. Maximizing Student Learning
9. Supporting School Improvement
10. Strengthening the Rigor of the Process
11. Strengthening the Effectiveness of the Commission's Public Voice
12. Increasing the Value of Accreditation to the American Public

Sources of Evidence

The next step was to delineate the sources of evidence. A source of evidence is based on an inquiry activity that is deliberately conducted for the purpose of generating evidence and/or for testing working conclusions of this study. Each source of evidence results in some form of written record.

Each reported finding in the next section includes a reference to the source(s) of evidence upon which it is based. (SE # __)

Listing the sources in this way does not properly indicate that some of the sources overlay each other in complex ways.

While the sources of evidence are listed here, each is described in more detail in the Appendix to this report. In addition, *Visiting Accreditation Supplement: Source-of-Evidence Documents* includes the supplementary documents that served as evidence.

Sources of Evidence

1. Observation of six complete NEASC/CSS school accreditation visits
2. Observation of self-study activities in five schools
3. Observation of and participation in Commission meetings
4. Observation of and participation in the work of the Commission's Standards Review Committee
5. Observation of and participation in the work of the Commission's Self-Study Review Committee
6. Observation of and participation in Training Workshops for Team Chairs
7. Interviews of national experts
   - 7a. About the history of accreditation
   - 7b. About the nature of effective school standards
   - 7c. About current legal issues
8. Compilation of a comprehensive *Bibliography on Accreditation* (Prepared for this study)
9. Constructing *Steps of the NEASC/CPSS Accreditation* (Prepared for this study)
10. Preparing *Foundations of the Visit* (Catalpa Ltd.)
11. Analysis of documents on the history of both NEASC and the Commission
12. Analysis of handbooks and guides prepared by NEASC/CPSS
13. Review of handbooks and guides from other American accrediting associations and international school-visit protocols
14. Feedback from Chairs of the observed visiting teams regarding the initial findings of this study
15. Feedback from nine working session discussions about the initial findings of the study
16. Feedback from NEASC/CPSS staff

Working Findings

Working Findings were generated after the collection of evidence was well underway. If the validation of a working finding required changes or additions to the sources of evidence, that would supercede the initial design. In this way, *Working Findings* influenced the development of the *Sources of Evidence*, which in turn influenced the next iteration of the *Working Findings*. A working finding often began as a rather simple idea that developed density and strength, as it was refined and shaped by additional tests against the evidence.

Feedback on Working Findings

To increase certainty about the accuracy, fairness and usefulness of a finding, the working findings were scrutinized by participants in the process and by commentators not associated with NEASC/CPSS or its member schools.

Since the feedback, observations and reactions served as new evidence for testing and/or supporting the working findings, they became *Sources of Evidence* and are described in that section.

Final Findings

In preparing this report, the working findings were reviewed carefully one more time and then cast in the final static state in which they are presented here.

Limits of the Design—Certainty of the Findings and the Commission Decisions

The research design does **not** allow for statistical statements of certainty (such as a probability coefficient) about a finding. From a research perspective more precise certainty might now be gleaned about some of the findings by subjecting them to other, more traditional research approaches. Regardless of research certainty, what, if anything, the Commission decides to change in response to this report will become the most valid indicator of the utility and persuasiveness of these findings.

These findings have been deliberately shaped to be relevant to the Commission. Their first purpose is to articulate how a complex human endeavor actually works. This will give the Commission better leverage to act responsibly toward its members by assuring that the accreditation process is fair, valid and as useful as possible. The second purpose is to suggest to the Commission some areas for improvement.

The Commission must base its decisions on its own collective knowledge and judgment, not on claims that the findings are truer or wiser because they are based on research. These findings have been subjected to enough feedback and are certain enough that the Commission should not dodge their implications by calling for more research to create more certainty. Rather, the Commission should act from its tradition and accept the findings that make sense.

FINDINGS ON THE CHARACTER AND QUALITY OF THE 1997 ACCREDITATION PROCESS

Most of the findings in this section are based on evidence from the accreditation process as it was **practiced** in 1997. Most of the evidence supporting these findings was collected in 1997 and 1998. Each finding cites at least two sources of evidence that support it.

A citation is in the form of "SE (a number)." The list of the *Sources of Evidence* is presented on page 38, as well as in the Appendix. When necessary, more detail about the evidence is presented for some of the findings.

1. INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Introduction

Many of the findings reported for this focus area relate to issues raised in the preceding section, *Context*. The first group of findings relates to how the Statement of Purpose is tied to the historical and organizational context issues. The text of the Statement of Purpose is on page 31.

Findings

1. **The Commission has embraced serving the public interest as its central rationale.**

   The 1996 Statement of Purpose states that the Commission's central rationale is to serve the public interest. Compared to the early days, this is stated with substantial clarity. It is possible to argue that the Association's initial purpose—to meet the need for greater cooperation between the colleges and the college preparatory schools—was a limited concept of serving the public interest.

   If the Commission is to serve the public interest, how the public perceives accreditation becomes even more important. This purpose creates a new set of challenges for an organization that has deliberately sought a low public profile and that has not explained itself well to the public. This is addressed more fully in later findings,

particularly in *Focus Area 6* and *Focus Area 11.* (SE # 7b, SE # 11, SE # 16)

2. **Maximizing student learning is now the central focus of NEASC/CPSS accreditation.**

The Statement of Purpose is explicit that member schools are required to maximize student learning. NEASC/CPSS now states that accreditation must consider the learning results of its member schools and that a school must focus on this as its primary function. While this represents a radical change in the content of standards and the accreditation process, it is consistent with the national consensus that the central focus of a school should be on learning.

The focus on maximizing learning is addressed more fully in later findings, particularly in *Focus Area* 8. (SE # 8, SE # 3, SE # 4, SE # 15)

3. **School improvement is now a central purpose of the process.**

The new requirement of the 1996 Statement of Purpose that schools must have in place a "proactive and on-going school improvement process" reflects the contemporary idea that effective school improvement is school-based.

The idea that accreditation must support school improvement is not new to NEASC/CPSS, but it does cause more discussion and uncertainty of agreement within NEASC/CPSS than "maximizing student learning." This uncertainty probably originates in the century-long discussion about membership and accreditation and not in disagreements about the importance of school improvement as an idea.

Maintaining accreditation for the dual purpose of monitoring adherence and supporting improvement results in better monitoring and better improvement than favoring one over the other. It also furthers the NEASC/CPSS purpose of serving the public interest by defining accreditation as a tool to help schools become better, rather than simply as a tool to determine whether they adhere to a set of standards. (SE # 3, SE # 11, SE # 15)

4. **NEASC/CPSS membership now carries a dual responsibility for the school and the Commission.**

The original draft of the Statement of Purpose listed only the responsibilities of the member schools. By requesting that its own

responsibilities be included in the Statement of Purpose, the Commission recognized that it had redefined the basis of membership.

The clear focus of the new Statement of Purpose on learning and school improvement results in greater and more intrusive demands on member schools. Some Commission members and observers of accreditation worry that an inherent weakness of voluntary accreditation associations is that schools can leave if the pressure on them is increased. Partly in response to this, NEASC/CPSS is now more explicit about its own responsibilities. Defining membership with this dual responsibility to meet the common goals of maximal student learning and school improvement supports the argument that member schools joined together by the Association can better serve the public together than either individual schools or the Association can alone.

This is a sound response. (SE # 3, SE # 7b, SE # 11)

5. **A practitioner way of doing things is at the heart of NEASC/CPSS.**

School practitioners carry out most key planning and decision-making activities. Serving on a voluntary basis, they set the standards, conduct the self-study, visit schools and decide whether schools will be accredited or not. This often confounds government bureaucrats, education researchers and, sometimes NEASC/CPSS. NEASC/CPSS does not have the usual plethora of consultants and experts that cluster around state departments, districts and schools. (SE 1, SE 4, SE 9, SE 12)

6. **The components of the accreditation process make sense.**

The current division of the accreditation process into a self-study, the visit, Commission decision-making and follow-up is well conceived. These components have evolved and withstood the test of time. (SE # 1, SE # 2, SE # 3, SE # 12.)

2. THE ACCREDITATION SCHOOL VISIT

Introduction: The Visit as a Method for Knowing Schools

The accreditation school visit is the starting point and the center of this study. This study posits that an understanding of the visit will lead to findings about how to strengthen the rigor of the visit that would in turn strengthen the other elements of the accreditation process. The first and most extensive study activity was to observe full visits in six New England schools. Several other study activities were tied to these observations.

> **NOTE:** NEASC/CPSS uses several terms that refer to the visit and to the team, with "the evaluation" and "Visiting Committee" the most prevalent. I have arbitrarily chosen "accreditation school visit" and "visiting team." These are often shortened to the "visit" and the "team."

The NEASC/CPSS accreditation school visit is the signature event of the accreditation process. The actuality of a real event provides the school with the impetus to complete its self-study well and on time. The visit is the bridge between the self-study and what NEASC/CPSS decides about accrediting a school. NEASC/CPSS's follow-up strategy starts from the recommendations of the team. A visit that "checks the school out" strengthens the legitimacy of accreditation in the public eye. Educators, who participate on visiting teams, strongly agree that this experience is an important professional development experience for them, as well as a legitimate exercise in school evaluation. Nevertheless, the visit is commonly viewed as an administrative process. When pressed to be more specific, such as when writing its handbooks, NEASC/CPSS most frequently describes the visit in terms of "Steps to Complete." (This study 's description of the visit process in terms of "steps" is presented in *Sources of Evidence # 9*).

This study assumed that considering the NEASC/CPSS visit, as a method for learning how well a school functions, would yield much more interesting and useful study findings than considering the visit as an administrative process. The differences between a method of inquiry and an administrative process are the different purposes that drive each. A method works to generate information and knowledge that will be considered legitimate and valuable. It provides important ground rules for design and procedures for arriving at a result of knowledge that is not predetermined. A process sets out the ideal way to reach a goal or complete a task that is specified. The outcome is certain if the steps are followed. To consider the visit a process is to see its

objective as finishing the report and recommending accreditation. To consider the visit as a method is to see that the objective of the design is to ensure that the team will learn all it can about the school as accurately and fairly as possible. From that learning it writes its report.

While a visit contains both elements of method and process, there are important advantages to considering it first as a method, and second as a process. When discussed as a method, the visit:

- Acknowledges that a team's ability to do its job well depends on how well that team understands or knows that school.
- Provides a useful framework for considering how to strengthen the rigor of the team's procedures, as well as the rigor of accreditation.
- Provides a solid basis for claiming to both the school and the public that its findings are legitimate.
- Raises the visibility, value and legitimacy of a practitioner method for knowing a school.
- Increases the explicit understanding of practitioners about what shapes excellence in their practice.

If the visit is seen as a methodology, then it is possible to devise logical and effective rules for evidence gathering and decision making. These rules imply helpful limits on what must be done to assure that conclusions and the knowledge generated by the visit are accurate, fair and useful. Framing the visit as a methodology makes it easier for a team to do a good visit. A visit will be done poorly if clear rules are not followed.

A disadvantage of considering the visit as a method for knowing schools is that school practitioners are often first puzzled by the idea of "a method." They prefer to see the visit as a series of steps they must complete without regard to a "philosophical" approach. They usually change their minds, when they discover that the method of the visit is not as complex as they expected, but is instead quite straightforward.

Considering the visit as a method led to the following research questions for the study of the six NEASC/CPSS visits (SE # 1):

> What makes it possible for a CPSS/NEASC visiting team to decide that it knows enough, as a team, about the school to:
>
> > Shape public conclusions about how well a school does against CPSS/NEASC standards?
> >
> > Commend the school for what it does well?

Recommend how the school can do better?

Recommend to NEASC what the school's accreditation status should be?

The fact that so little research has been done on accreditation or the visit, as a method for knowing schools, meant that this study had to follow a circular route to reach the findings below.

First, it was necessary to describe the steps of the NEASC/CPSS accreditation process in some detail with an emphasis on the visit. These steps are presented in SE # 9. While the steps are in one sense a finding of the study, they also served as a source of evidence for other findings. The steps were built through several iterations; each iteration took into account comments of the chairs, members of the visiting teams and CPSS staff.

Second, it was necessary to consider how the NEASC/CPSS visit protocol could strengthen the visit as a methodology. There was no good tool for making such judgments. *Foundations of the School Visit*, SE # 10, was created in part to provide a template for arriving at findings of this type. *Foundations* was prepared while this study was in progress. In fact, the emerging findings about the nature of the NEASC/CPSS visit informed *Foundations,* as well as other visit protocols. (A fuller acknowledgement of the other sources for *Foundations* is presented there.)

Findings

1. **The school accreditation visit is based on a visit methodology for knowing a school.**

   The most important finding of this study is that the NEASC/CPSS school accreditation visit is best understood as a methodology for knowing a school. The visiting team generates knowledge about the school's practice that then becomes the basis for determining how well that school adheres to the standards and what recommendations to make.

   How well a team uses the visit as a way to generate knowledge about the practice of the school determines the accuracy, fairness and utility of the team's conclusions.

   While a visit always has a focused substantive purpose—such as deciding how well a school meets a set of standards—a team should not first ask, "Does this school meet the standard," but rather, "What do

we know about this school from what we have seen and how do we know our observation is accurate?"

How well a team adheres to the elements of the visit (See *Foundations)* determines how much it will learn about what actually happens at the school, how well individual team members will contribute during formal discussions, what the team knows informally about the school and how valuable its report will be. (SE # 1, SE # 9, SE # 10, SE # 12, SE # 14, SE # 15, SE # 16)

2. **The accreditation visit proceeds through four phases.**

NEASC/CPSS teams move through several distinct phases. (*Foundations* describes these overlapping, but distinct, phases as "engaging the school and the team's task," "gathering evidence," "considering evidence and building conclusions," and "writing the report.") The team's growing knowledge of the school is what impels it through the phases. The team's growing knowledge about what it must do to complete its task and the dynamics within the team are important, but secondary in importance to its knowledge of the school. (SE # 1, SE # 9, SE # 10, SE # 14, SE # 15, SE # 16)

3. **The accreditation visit is built around a dynamic of inquiry.**

The dynamic that pushes the team forward in its inquiry (also described in *Foundations)* is best described as one in which conclusions are constructed, based on evidence, pushed by a set of informal questions that require the team to learn about the school:

What is going on here?

What does that say or mean about the school?

What should the school do about it?

Each team identifies topics or issues about a school that it chooses to pursue. Topics will emerge again and again in the team's discussion until the team either has reached certainty about the issue, decided that the topic is not important to its undertaking or decided that reaching certainty is not possible within the limits of the visit. (SE # 1, SE # 9, SE # 10, SE # 14, SE # 15, SE # 16)

4. **NEASC/CPSS does not usually consider the visit as a method.**

Since the prevailing NEASC/CPSS consciousness does not consider the visit as a method for learning about schools, it misses what is most essential about the nature of a visit. Most often the visit is seen as a series of administrative procedures or steps to be carried out, not as a way for the team to learn about the school. This perspective on the nature of the visit pervades the training of team chairs, the orientation of team members and the guidance from NEASC/CPSS.

Exceptions to NEASC/CPSS's usual view of the nature of the visit often are manifested in moments, when team members debrief or informally talk with others about the personal and professional value of the visit. In these and other informal sessions NEASC/CPSS staff are also likely to say that the visit is a fascinating way to learn about schools.

There is a shared sense among most team members that the visit is a special event, not just another administrative procedure that must be followed. There is a shared sense that the hard work of a team matters, that it is valued, that—since it is both complex and poorly articulated—that it must be experienced to be well understood. (SE # 1, SE # 9, SE # 12, SE # 14, SE # 15, SE # 16)

5. **The standards of accreditation provide the substance of and the structure for the report of the team.**

The content, clarity and structure of NEASC standards play an important, but secondary, role in how a team generates knowledge. Standards help reduce the common anxiety of team members, who want to know what they are looking for before they arrive at the school. Standards perform the much more important function of providing a good structure for a team's report. Unclear or inappropriate standards handicap a team's ability to understand a school by shifting its focus from trying to know the school to trying to understand what a standard means or why it is being used.

In 1997 the standards presented some minor distractions, particularly for team members who were new to NEASC/CPSS. The large number of standards, the notion that each standard stands alone, that each is as important as the others——all served to deter the team from building a coherent, shared understanding of the practice in the school. Teams that functioned well were able to see how what they were

reporting related to the school, as well as to the standards, and they were able to show that interaction. Nevertheless, standards are secondary to the team's process. Beyond eliminating aspects of standards that distract the team focus, it is not as effective to modify standards to strengthen the rigor of the visit, as it is to strengthen the procedures for coming to know a school well from the context of a visit. (SE # 1, SE # 12, SE # 15)

6. **The purpose of the visit is not to validate the self-study.**

It is common for a NEASC/CPSS team to see its task as "validating" the school's self-study. Whatever the origin of this misperception, it causes confusion about the purpose of the visit and how it functions.[6] To say that the team must consider only what is in the self-study would too narrowly define "validation." Under such terms the team does not comment on the inherent value of what the school says it does, nor does it comment on issues omitted from the self-study.

This type of validation undermines the visit method, because it does not recognize how a visiting team actually works. When the visit is seen as series of steps toward accreditation, then it is easy to conclude that the visit is greatly influenced by how well an earlier step in the process was carried out.

In fact, for most teams the self-study is an important place to jump off. It is the most important school document the team will consider. Team members, who have spent time with the self-study before arriving at the school, are usually better organized for their work of understanding the actual life of the school.

Team members may begin to check out the self-study in order to "validate" it. But their initial perceptions about the school, based on their own actual standards and knowledge as practitioners, will determine what they see and discuss, not the self-study. What the

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Accreditation was first carried out by teams of university faculty, who examined schools in regard to university standards. The self-study was added later, most likely in mid-century. (O'Bryan 1980 (ca), p. 38) A more detailed history of the self-study would shed light on the origins of the notion of "validation." My hypothesis is that part of the initial rational for including self-study was to insure that the process would respect the autonomy of member schools.

team has learned from the self-study comes into play with what it sees in the school. The team uses an evolving set of evidence and conclusions to write about the standards, the quality of the self-study and/or whatever else is the focus of its report. The self-study does not determine the method of the team's work, i.e., the method of the visit. The accuracy and utility of the team's report depends on how well it carries out its method, not on the quality of the self-study.[7]

Some believe that a good self-study will improve the ease and quality of the visit. This is a fallacy, since the actual life of the school defines the visit more than any artifact of that life, including the self-study. The actual life of the school catches the attention of a team and becomes what the team uses to ground its knowledge for checking any artifact of that life, including a self-study. That is why there are visits.

How well the self-study reflects what the team comes to understand about the quality of the school's functioning may or may not be what is reflected in the self-study. When a team finds a self-study that is well done and a school that functions poorly, it has a difficult puzzle to unscramble. That happens.

It is more common for a team to find that a well-done self-study reflects a coherent, well-functioning school that presents few inconsistencies for them to figure out. The team's task is easier because the school is easier to understand, not because it has produced a good self-study. Nevertheless, when the quality of the self-study is used as a predictor for the success of the visit, that distorts the central function of the visit. This leads to inaccurate perceptions of the school. If a school believes it can protect itself from an honest appraisal of how well it is doing by producing a good self-study, that can be harmful to the school and to the process.

The design of the self-study has limited impact on the functioning of the team. Its design, however, does have major impact on what a school does for the self-study. Further findings about the self-study appear in the next section. (SE # 1, SE # 2, SE # 9, SE # 10, SE # 12, SE # 14, SE # 16)

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[7] See *Source-of-Evidence* # 9 for a description of the steps in the visit process.

7. **The effect of leadership style and competence of visiting team chairs is not as great as is usually assumed.**

Attributing great importance to the chair's individual style of leadership or competence is another fallacy that comes from underestimating the power of the methodology of the visit. The team is not dependent on the chair to move the visit. The considerable variation in styles and competence exhibited by chairs in managing the team's discussion and preparing the report is important. As will be discussed later, team chairs play a very helpful role, if they are trained to understand the fundamental nature of a visit and how it works best.

Confused reports more often reflect confused schools than incompetent chairs. The nature of the school is the most important variable that explains why some teams are more productive than others and why they produce better reports. In a confused school a team may not have time to gain the clarity and certainty it needs about every issue in order to write a high quality report.

Chairs, who understand that the team must learn first about the school, provide the best team leadership. They are able to provide interesting, practical solutions to the problems of inquiry that team members raise during the process, e.g. "How do I find out if the librarian really supports the school's curricula objectives?" This results in a report with more depth and substance.

Chairs who lack this understanding can hold the process together without adding much to it. Those who see the visit as simply a validation of the self-study or as a procedural exercise, or worse, who come with a preconceived idea of what the team should say, hamper the process and limit the value of the report. Interestingly enough, once they have gained a shared understanding of the school, teams often find ways to work around ineffectual chairs. (SE # 1, SE # 6, SE # 9, SE # 12, SE # 14, SE # 16)

8. **Accepting the visit as a methodology provides new conceptual levers for improving its design and rigor.**

Since NEASC/CPSS expectations about and procedures for the accreditation visit have evolved from working through logistic issues or from changes in the standards, its practice contains elements that confuse the central task of the visit. Procedures that are inappropriate and activities that are inefficient, given the short time the team is in

the school, can undermine the central dynamic of the team becoming certain about what it knows and can say about the school.

The following examples are not a complete list:

It neither accurate nor useful to use the term "perceptions" to describe the team's central comments about how well a school adheres to a standard. This may stem for a desire to make the school feel that its work is not really being judged by a team of peers. ("They have their perceptions, we have ours.") The accuracy and fairness of what the team concludes about the school is what makes its report valuable to the school. The term "perceptions" undercuts the team's responsibility for making accurate and fair conclusions by implying that only its opinion has been sought and that doesn't count much. The term hides the true nature of the visit from everyone.

The current requirement that a team list two sources of evidence for each recommendation does not make sense. Evidence should support the team's "perceptions" (renamed conclusions or findings.) Its recommendations then will follow.

Often a team member will quote someone in the school, as if that provided final evidence for a point or even a conclusion. While the rules for evidence allow such a comment to be accepted as evidence, it should be given no greater weight than any other piece of evidence. If the view of a school participant is treated as better evidence than what the team discovers on its own, this undermines the team's responsibility to determine its own evidence, conclusions and recommendations. The team's consideration is undermined even further if what a school participant says serves by itself as a conclusion. The team must build evidence and conclusions from its own knowledge and wisdom, from its sense of what is fair and what will be useful, not from what school participants say.

The team should spend more time at normal school activities and less time at special meetings and other events, which a school has arranged for the sole purpose of providing information to "validate" its self-study.

Teams commonly are required to visit briefly all the classrooms in a school so that no teacher can complain about being left out. The team chair charges most teams to visit classes, when there are no meetings to attend or writing tasks to finish. "Go to the classes of teachers who

have not been observed. Spend no more than five minutes. Do not take notes." This practice is the result of a failure to understand the visit as a method for knowing.

Before 1995 the NEASC/CPSS standards did not consider classroom instruction. Classrooms were not where the team found out what it needed to know. The dramatic shift in focus to "maximizing student learning" requires a dramatic shift in how the visit is conducted in terms of the time the team spends in classrooms and the attention it places there.

While this lack of serious attention to what happens in classrooms may now seem an oversight, it has been endemic in American education. It seems inconceivable that any process used to evaluate a school would avoid knowing how well that institution carries out its central function. This inconsistency is not only a problem for NEASC/CPSS. It reflects how Americans in general have thought about their schools.

The unnecessary length of the team report, the emphasis on description, and the necessity of breaking the team into sub-groups by standards, all contribute to weakening how well the team will come to know the school.

Findings in the section, *The Rigor of the Process*, provide more details of problems that need attention, if the visit is to gain more rigor. (SE # 1, SE # 9, SE # 10, SE # 12, SE # 14, SE # 15)

9. **The NEASC/CPSS visit has contributed to our understanding of the methodology of the visit.**

Although it may at first seem inappropriate to hold the NEASC/CPSS visit up against the *Foundations of the Visit*, in fact, the current NEASC/CPSS visit shaped those elements, which have been forged from observation of the actual practice of the visit, not from a theoretical framework.

A particular contribution that the CPSS/NEASC visit has made to our understanding of how the visit works best as a methodology is NEASC/CPSS's insistence that recommendations are about action, but that they must not prescribe specific action. This practice acknowledges the legitimate limits of the visit methodology and honors the fact that the central responsibility for improvement rests with the school, not with the team or NEASC/CPSS. It honors the fact that the

school has much more complex knowledge about what it can do that can be brought to bear on deciding what specific action to take. This also has the utilitarian advantage of increasing the likelihood that the school will own the change. (SE # 1, SE # 3, SE # 10, SE # 15)

10. **The NEASC/CPSS visit successfully meets the central criteria of the *Foundations of the Visit*, but it needs revision to sharpen its rigor and increase its utility.**

These findings and their evidence further support the central finding about that visit: the NEASC/CPSS accreditation visit is a method for knowing a school.

This finding is out of line with the prevailing view of NEASC/CPSS about the nature of the visit. The prevailing NEASC/CPSS view is inaccurate and imprecise. It underplays the value, legitimacy and power of the visit. It results in several procedural problems for how the visit is conducted.

The NEASC/CPSS visit does not need to be reconstructed in a radical way. Rather NEASC/CPSS needs to take full advantage of this finding that its visit is a methodology. To strengthen the rigor of its visit, the Commission should reshape the visit protocol so that it contributes to a team's ability to reach certain conclusions about the school and how well it adheres to the Commission's standards. This will result in a much more useful tool for member schools, the Commission and the public. (SE # 1, SE # 10)

3. THE SELF STUDY

Introduction

A peculiar warp in this study is that the sources of evidence regarding the 1997 self-study are much weaker than the sources of evidence for the visit. (See *Source-of-Evidence* # 2.) Yet, the findings about the self-study suggest the need for a much more radical reconstruction of that process.

While the term "self-study" was changed to "Self-Assessment" in 1998, this report uses the 1997 term.

Findings on the new Year 2000 self-study design are presented later in the section on *Findings to Provoke and Support the Commission.*

Findings

1. **Schools do not think the self-study has much value, except as the road to accreditation.**

   The self-study component of the 1997 process generated strong negative comments from schools—much stronger than for any other component of the accreditation process. This reaction must carefully be considered, since many schools appear to go through a period of extended fussing during the early stages of coming to grips with what they must do.

   Due to the design of this study, more schools commented on self-study either in later stages or after completing their self-study than those schools in early stages of self-study. In addition, there is only weak evidence that the fussing schools were seeking ways to avoid the legitimate difficulties of accreditation. Most schools did not reject the self-study, but wanted it to be constructed into a more efficient and constructive catalyst for the school with less emphasis on producing a huge report to meet the requirements of accreditation.

   Negative comments were frequently offset by acknowledgments that completing the self-study had been a constructive activity for the school because it allowed the school to pull together all that it was doing. But even the schools that were supportive of the value of self-study, as a whole school exercise, were often critical of important parts of the current design. (SE # 2, SE # 12, SE # 15)

2. **The current self-study** (before 1997) **is not aligned with the Statement of Purpose.**

When considered as a component of the accreditation process, the self-study falls short of furthering the new Statement of Purpose. It does not focus the school on teaching and learning, nor is it designed as an efficient tool for school improvement. It lacks rigor in its method. It is not a problem of the standards, but of the process and method of self-study.

For example, common sense suggests that, if the focus is on teaching and learning, there must be room in the process for observing and considering actual teaching. The current process relies heavily on faculty discussion and review of documents about teaching. The current process requires the school to describe, not analyze, how well it is doing in each of the standard areas. (SE # 2, SE # 5,SE # 11, SE # 15)

3. **The self-study is best seen as a tool for school improvement.**

The NEASC/CPSS self-study was designed as an element of an accreditation process for monitoring school adherence to standards. But over time it has evolved into a tool more suitable for school improvement.

Neither the traditional English system of school inspection nor the early versions of American accreditation included a self-study. It is likely that the self-study in accreditation originated as an answer to the schools' fears that they would lose their local autonomy in setting their own basic directions—a strong value held by American schools. It makes sense that the self-study was begun as a way to give schools some control over a threatening process. It is much easier for an American school to come to terms with the notion that an outside team is coming to validate only what it has set forth, than that the team might say anything about everything.

Schools no longer see the self-study only as a way to maintain their autonomy in the process. Over the last twenty years considerable work has been done to strengthen the self-study as a tool for school improvement. It is on this basis that schools are critical of the current design.

The findings about the visit show that the self-study can be (and should be) conceptually unhooked from the visit. Since NEASC/CPSS

now defines school improvement as a critical part of the purpose of accreditation, it must consider a radical self-study design that will stimulate schools to use NEASC/CPSS standards as tools for improvement. (SE # 2, SE # 8, SE # 11, SE # 12).

4. **The work of the NEASC/CPSS staff in supporting schools during the process is high caliber, particularly considering the level of available resources.**

The quality, clarity and thoroughness of the materials and guides that have been created by the CPSS/NEASC staff and that are in current use by schools (and visiting teams) are excellent.

CPSS staff members have been remarkably helpful in their assistance to schools that are working on a self-study, given the obvious major limits of time, resources and design. (SE # 2, SE # 12, SE # 15)

4. DECISION-MAKING

Introduction

The Commission meets quarterly to decide the accreditation status of its member schools, as well as those seeking accreditation for the first time. At each meeting decisions are made regarding the status of 100-125 schools.

The Commission is a voluntary membership organization, not a public bureaucracy. Accreditation means membership. Thus, through each ot its decisions regarding a school's status, the Commission is not only determining some aspect of the future of the school under review, but it is also shaping its own future.

Although the Commission is best known for granting initial accreditation to a school or renewing it after the required 10-year evaluation, it makes several other kinds of decisions as well. The Commission decides to:

- Grant accreditation to schools that have completed the evaluation (the self-study and the visit) for the first time.
- Continue accreditation for accredited schools that have completed the 10-year evaluation process (the Decennial).
- Accept the regular and required two-year and five-year school progress reports. (These are two and five years after the evaluation.)
- Require each member school to prepare "Special Progress Reports," in which it responds in writing to the Commission's concern about how well it adheres to the standards or what its progress is in implementing a recommendation that has been made during a regular review process. These reports comprise the bulk of the decisions made at each Commission meeting.
- Place a school on warning. This may happen, when an issue is judged important enough. The Commission must review the status of a school that has placed on warning in light of its response to its concerns. It must decide whether to continue or remove the school's warning status, or to recommend to the Association trustees that the school be placed on probation.
- Recommend placing a school on probation. When a school is placed on probation, it will most likely be expected to resolve to the Commission's satisfaction the issue or issues cited for the probation. If the school fails to resolve these issues, or worse, if it shows no effort toward resolving them, the Commission may decide to recommend to the

Association that the school's accreditation be terminated. Probation implies that the school's membership status is in jeopardy unless the school fixes a specified problem of concern. The Commission defines problems in terms of how a school has failed to adhere to the standards. Before being placed on probation the school has an opportunity to "show cause" why it should not. The school has access to the Association's appeal procedure.

- Recommend to the Association that a school's accreditation status and membership be terminated. This action can be taken only if a school is already on probation. Again, the Commission asks the school "to show cause" before it takes action. A school has access to the Association's appeal procedure.

Other reports requiring Commission review are those of "Substantive Change" (filed by schools when there are changes, such as a new principal) and reports in which schools request a postponement of the decennial evaluation beyond the ten-year mark.

The Commission makes policy decisions about its accreditation process, including approving new standards and procedures. It also makes requests of the Association or proposals for action on issues such as budget and number of staff.

This study 's observations of Commission decision-making were more limited than its observations of the visit. See *Source-of-Evidence* # 3.

Findings

1. **Integrity and thoughtfulness mark Commission decision making.**

   The voluntary nature of its membership, its focused attention, thoughtful discussion, respect for the views of its individual members, adequate procedures to protect against conflict of interest, wide participation and good humor—all indicate the integrity of the Commission's process. While this study deliberately did not investigate the Commission's process, no evidence was found to suggest that personal influence or private agreements among Commission members played an inappropriate role in its decisions. (SE # 3)

2. **The Commission Board is served by high quality staff preparation.**

   The complex logistics for managing the prodigious flow of paper necessary for the Commission's voluminous decision making is

extremely well thought out and implemented by paid staff. For example, at a typical Board meeting, the Commission took action on more than 130 schools, organized into 15 different categories of action that range from accreditation to Special Progress Reports. The staff provided all the necessary paper work for each action. (SE # 3)

3. **The decision making function of the Commission Board plays a critical review function in the total accreditation process.**

Keeping evaluation and accreditation separate is important to NEASC/CPSS thinking. Evaluation is what happens at the school; accreditation is what happens at the Commission meetings. The Commission decides the status of a school's accreditation (and membership) based on the evaluation of how well the school adheres to the standards.

While it is possible to quibble about this choice of words, this separation of functions is sound. Accreditation is not automatic; it is granted by the explicit decision of the Commission. Keeping evaluation separate from accreditation provides an oversight to the evaluation process and a check on the consistency of the Commission's decisions. It also acknowledges that by its nature the Commission (and the Association) is a voluntary, membership-based organization that maintains some valuable ritual elements. Finally, since the Commission makes decisions about standards and process, the meetings provide a continuing, working overview of how the total process is working. (SE # 3, SE # 12, SE # 16)

4. **Strengthening the decision-making component is dependent on making changes in other components of the process.**

Although this study did not explicitly focus on strengthening the Commission's decision-making, some of the findings reported below have direct implications for how decisions are made. Changes in other components of the process would make it possible for the Commission to modify this function. In short, if there are no changes in other components of the process, the current decision making process is about as good as possible.

As the Commission raises its standards and takes tougher action, its decisions about school status will become even more important. One criterion for judging a component of the accreditation process is how

well it provides good information for the decisions the Commission must make.

Naïve observers of accreditation sometimes cite the fact that Commission decisions are made behind closed-doors as evidence that decisions are soft or subject to inappropriate influence. The Commission could respond by more clearly describing its decision-making policies and procedures, including its strong emphasis on the relationship between accreditation and membership. It would clarify common confusion of member schools and the public to use a different term than "Commission" and "members" to refer to the decision-making group, reserving those terms for the full organization including its "board," staff, and member schools.

It would be a mistake to award school accreditation without the review and moderation of a duly constituted decision-making group (i.e. the current "board").

It would also be a mistake for the Commission to make the process more open or public. The capacity to discuss decisions and arrive at corporate agreement is an important privilege of a private, voluntary association. Like a jury in a court, the Commission's job is to come to a simple and direct conclusion based on mounds of complex evidence. While those, who are not in the jury room, may debate the wisdom, fairness and implications of an actual decision, it would destroy the process to make it public. The Commission, like the visiting team, needs privacy to discuss unsubstantiated conclusions and evidence, as it figures out what a solid, responsible decision, based on the evidence, would be. Furthermore, opening the decision-making process to the possibility of continual bickering about evidence is distracting to the ongoing progress of democratic institutions that are struggling to reach difficult and important decisions of this type. (SE # 3, SE # 10)

5. FOLLOW-UP

Introduction

Judged by the criteria for evidence in this study, the evidence for this focus area is the most problematic. While some forms and written guidance were available and while there was some discussion, the actual correspondence and reports between NEASC/CPSS and its member schools were not reviewed. Interviews on this topic with Association staff and the schools were minimal.

As school improvement becomes more important for NEASC/CPSS, this component of the accreditation process must be considered. Observers of effective school improvement processes agree that follow-up is important. Strengthening this area is problematic for NEASC/CPSS, since it would be most obvious to provide direct support to member schools between decennials. This would stretch NEASC/CPSS beyond its current capacity, resulting in untenable increases in dues. Such action would run headlong into questions about organizational appropriateness.

Findings

1. **Follow-up is the weakest component. It is limited by the Commission's resources and raises questions about the Commission's primary functions.**

   If the only concern were how well a school adheres to the standards, follow-up would be easy. It would be cut and dry. Since school improvement is part of the picture, follow-up has not been easy for NEASC/CPSS.

   The increased national demand for school improvement heightens NEASC/CPSS's responsibility to insure that its process effectively supports schools to improve their performance. What a school does with its accreditation results has become even more important to NEASC/CPSS. How its recommendations support the school to do what it must do also becomes more important. NEASC/CPSS has assumed additional responsibility for how well its recommendations play out at the school.

   The greater weight given to school improvement changes how the Commission views its recommendations. Instead of basing them on the straight forward criterion of what a school must do to meet a standard,

it must now base them on more complex criterion of what will work best in the total situation the school faces in which it must move itself forward.

While the Commission often considers this broader criterion in the current arrangement, the emphasis on school improvement has made it more explicit. The Commission is not only saying what the school must do, but it is considering how to make what it says to the school effective.

One result is that the Commission's heavy reliance on written documents will probably subside so more complex conversations can ensue. Follow-up is currently carried out by requiring schools to report to NEASC/CPSS in writing on how well they are proceeding in implementing the recommendations for action that were cited by the visiting teams. Each school must complete a two-year and a five-year report. NEASC/CPSS also may request special reports. Schools that are on warning or probation are usually required to file special reports.

The requirement of a written report is a noticeably weak way to push a school to improve. Yet, without reconfiguring some of the organizational limits, it is difficult to conceive a better way at this time. Changes in other sections of the process as discussed later, will open up new possibilities. Most of the relevant changes for follow-up procedures are in *Focus Area* # 9. (SE # 3, SE # 12, SE # 15, SE # 16)

6. THE COMMISSION'S VOICE

Introduction

In its 1997 Statement of Purpose the Commission made its function of serving the public interest not only explicit, but also central. The Commission will best serve this new function by considering how it now speaks in the public interest.

This focus area presents study findings about the condition of the Commission's voice in 1997, which then sets the stage for the related findings in *Focus Area* # 11, *Strengthening the Effectiveness of the Commission's Public Voice.*

Voice not only includes what the Commission says, but how well it is heard and by whom.

Findings

1. **The Commission provides a strong voice for member schools undergoing decennial reviews.**

   The Commission has a strong voice in schools that are undergoing the two-year review process. The Commission has a great deal of useful advice about how the process should be done. The school hears that reasonably well. Schools value the Commission's advice in part because they see "giving the Commission what it wants" as a sound strategy for keeping their accreditation. Most of the conversation is about how the school should work through the accreditation process. (SE # 1, SE # 2, SE # 15)

2. **The Commission's voice is surprisingly weak.**

   By and large NEASC and NEASC/CPSS have worked, sometimes deliberately, in a manner that results in isolation from the public discussion.

   Major observations support this:

   > While the general public has a high regard for accreditation, it has little understanding of its purpose or how it functions as a process.

The education research community does not consider accreditation worthy of study, even in this age of accountability.

The policy community ignores accreditation.

Strategists of standard-based reform ignore accreditation, even though accreditation has been using standards for considering school performance for more than a hundred years.

Planners interested in school visit methodologies are more likely to go to London to learn about the English inspection visit, than to go to the Association's offices in Bedford to learn about the American accreditation visit.

The meaning of accreditation and how it happens are poorly understood by member schools, other agencies of accountability, the educational research and policy communities and the public at large. This results in a strange, and ultimately dangerous, split in the public consciousness. Although citizens want their children to go to accredited schools, they don't know what that means.

Some of this is attributable to perspectives and circumstances beyond the Commission's control. Some is attributable to misconceptions and inaccurate information about accreditation. Some is attributable to internal, and sometimes defensive, attitudes within accreditation that reflect the general defensiveness of public education. Some is attributable to the lack of any concentrated effort to get the message out or to participate in the national discussion on school accountability, standards or school improvement.

See *Focus Area* # 11 for related findings. (SE # 7b, SE # 8, SE # 11, SE # 15)

FINDINGS TO PROVOKE AND SUPPORT THE COMMISSION

It may seem peculiar to call this next set of findings, *Findings*. These deal more with possibilities, than those already presented. They are about Commission action. If they were the study 's summation of the action the Commission should take, based on the findings already presented, then they would be called *Recommendations*. But, these findings are built from additional study observations and discussions about possibilities. Thus, they are indeed *Findings*.

The intent here is to both provoke and support the Commission as it carries out its challenging task of designing and managing NEASC/CPSS accreditation. This study has sought to work within the NEASC/CPSS tradition of sifting out prescriptions for action in order to honor the reality that the Commission is responsible for taking action. That is as it should be.

The format for presenting these additional findings is the same, except that previous findings are also cited. The format for citing a finding is indicated in this example: *Finding 1.2* is from the first focus area and is the second finding in that area.

7. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE 1998 REVIEW PROCESS

Introduction

The fact that the design of this study did not contain the traditional sequence between study and action created an interesting problem. The design deliberately took into account that the Commission would make changes in the process under study while it was under study.

In fact, during this time the Commission made historic changes in defining its new standards and initiating a new self-study process. Further, the principle investigator was a participant observer to both working committees and presented to them some of the initial findings on the component of the process under discussion. That presentation influenced the course of action. But, contrary to the normal rules of the separation of study and action, it actually contributed a great deal to the knowledge about the process. It is comforting to think that it might have contributed to the Commission's decisions.

The findings in this section are about the nature and quality of the changes that have been made. They include 1998 evidence.

Findings

1. **In its 1997 review of NEASC/CPSS standards the Commission made major progress.**

   In 1997 a working committee of Commission members shaped the new standards for schools, which will be used for school evaluations beginning in the year 2000. While these standards move in the same direction as the last revision, they represent a major leap forward in furthering the 1997 Statement of Purpose by sharpening the focus on student learning and school improvement.

   The new set of standards:

   > Builds coherence across the standards by grouping them as "Teaching and Learning Standards" and "Support Standards." "Support Standards" clearly support teaching and learning. In addition, both the narrative description and the several indicators for each standard tie them to teaching and learning.
   >
   > Reshapes the generalized language of the old standard on "Statement of Purpose" so that it explicitly requires the school to

prepare a statement of its basic beliefs and values on the one hand and a more specific statement of its expectations for student learning on the other.

Reduces the number of standards from ten to seven.

Resists the tendency seen in earlier sets of standards to list ideal indicators that no school could reasonably be expected to accomplish.

Uses clear and direct language.

The new standards are commendable. (SE # 4, SE # 7b, SE # 15, SE # 16)

2. **The Commission must continue to consider how other sets of standards relate to NEASC/CPSS standards.**

Considering how CPSS/NEASC standards should treat the multiple sets of standards that have emerged from other sources in recent years is a new problem. It was addressed for the first time in this set of standards.

Schools often cite the nature, range and numbers of standards that now impinge on them as distracting them from their central purpose. The current obsession of standards could result in a counter-view that all standards for schools are not useful.

NEASC/CPSS should work to distinguish its standards from those held by governing agencies and other groups and at the same time insure that its standards remain a meaningful and productive tool for judging and supporting schools. Thus, NEASC/CPSS should construct a more thorough approach to multiple sets of standards for schools so that schools are encouraged to consider all the standards that impinge on them in a cohesive, thoughtful and critical manner. (SE # 4, SE # 7b)

3. **The 1998 review resulted in a positive reconstruction of the self-study.**

In 1998 a working committee revised the self-study process to fit the new standards. The committee made historic changes in the design of the process. The real test of this new form of self-study, now called Self-Assessment, is how it works in the schools. It answers many of the issues raised in the earlier findings about the self-study. This is a dramatic and positive revision of self-study.

The most dramatic change in the self-study is that the school must prepare conclusions about how well it currently meets the standards. The older self-study required the school to demonstrate this fact with evidence. The school often listed its accomplishments and sometimes its problems, and provided a quick summary to the question of whether or not it met the standard. The shift to preparing conclusions, supported by evidence, requires the school to link the evidence it presents to what it says about how well it meets the standard. This more direct approach requires more analysis by the school, increasing the accuracy and utility of what it concludes. The process is more likely to support the school in its improvement efforts.

The self-study procedures have been simplified and the time required to complete the process has been reduced from two years to one (option of the third semester).

This commendable new NEASC/CPSS blueprint for school Self-Assessment is consistent with its Statement of Purpose. (SE # 5)

8. MAXIMIZING STUDENT LEARNING

Introduction

The findings in the *Focus Areas* 8, 9, 10 and 11 relate to issues in the design of the accreditation process that will best advance the Commission's Statement of Purpose. They address the central working questions of the study. Evidence for findings here include findings from other focus areas, and evidence from the study's sources of evidence.

Findings

1. **Standards are the primary lever in the design for maximizing student learning.**

   Accreditation standards govern the focus of the process. Their consistent use throughout the self-study, the visit and the decision-making activities is accepted and habitual.

   The new accreditation standards now focus clearly on "maximizing student learning." The older accreditation standards focused on the organization and management of the school, not on the classroom. The new set of standards is much more deliberate and successful in presenting student learning as the central focus for accreditation.

   Moreover, in providing this consistency of focus throughout, the new standards have been redesigned in basic ways that create new challenges and new possibilities for how they can be used by both the schools and the Association. Each of the old standards stood independently of the others. It was assumed that, if a school met the requirements of the standard for each of these separate organizational aspects (curriculum, library, etc.), it would be doing its job well and would be judged worthy of accreditation.

   The new standards focus first on the chief function of the school and then on how this function must permeate all other aspects of the school. This is a different concept of how to influence an organization, stemming from the thrust on school improvement. This uses the standards as a tactical strategy to push schools to focus first on their central function. This appears to be a very useful reconstruction of the use of standards.

While this change actually began in the last set of standards, it has taken an important leap forward. Still, there has not been enough time to test the effectiveness of the new standards in accreditation practice. More than likely good adjustments to them can be made based on practice.

From the outset two issues bear watching:

> Is the wording and structure of the standards and the guidance about how to use them adequate for schools to understand and act on them, particularly given that they significantly different from those before? If not, how can they be improved?
>
> Will it be better to simplify the standards even further, reducing their number and more clearly showing priorities among them?

(*Findings* # 7.1, 7.2; SE # 4)

2. **The elements of the visit and its practice must be critically revised, if it is to become consistent with the focus on teaching and learning.**

As the *Foundation Elements of the Visit* indicate, the visit is most powerful as a methodology, when it explicitly focuses on the central function of a school: teaching and learning. The greatest weakness in the current design of the visit is its lack of attention to the actual practice in the school, i.e. teaching and learning. The redesign of the visit is the most important change in procedure that the Commission must consider to best meet this aspect of its Statement of Purpose.

A new visit protocol must shift the balance of how the visiting team uses its time, so that it can spend much more time observing teaching and learning and considering how well the school performs this central function.

These specific changes in the visit protocol would address the point that teaching and learning must become the central focus of the visit:

> All team members should observe several full classes.
>
> Team members should take notes while they are in the classroom.
>
> The design of events for the team at the school should make sure that teaching and learning is not only accorded more time, but that it becomes the first and primary issue the team considers.

> The team should form its judgment about how well teaching and learning are actually taking place in the school and how the other aspects of the school support or hinder that central function.

As the *Foundation Elements* describe, the visit is an event in time. It is a social event that is designed for the team to learn about the school. Using the wisdom that first impressions are powerful shapers of how a person comes to understand social phenomena is relevant to the design of a visit protocol. In the current visit protocol the team's first important contact with the school is a tour of the facility on Sunday afternoon. Learning about the "important" people of the school and meeting those who welcome the team are important, but learning about students and how they learn is the team's primary task. The visit protocol would work better, if it accepted the way visits in fact shape what the team comes to know about a school and if it began with what is most important—observing teaching and learning as it takes place in actual classes. This approach will best use the visit methodology to further the Commission's Statement of Purpose.

In a similar manner, since the visit is an important and infrequent event, it carries considerable influence on how schools carry out their self-study. The design of the visit strongly influences the self-study and how the school prepares for that. A visit protocol that includes significant classroom observation sends a very different message to a school than one that calls for many meetings to discuss the self-study.

Teams make judgments based on the professional practitioner knowledge of their members. This implies a heavy dose of knowledge, not only about what should work, but also about what does work. The total pool of knowledge brought by the members of the team is crucial, if its work is to be accurate, fair and useful. If the visit places an increased emphasis on improving learning, it is even more important for the team to be made up of practitioners who are knowledgeable about how learning and good teaching actually happen.

This suggests that changes should be considered in the visit that will not only ensure that practicing teachers comprise the majority of team members, but that team procedures for assigning tasks and the organization of its discussion gives practicing teachers the dominant voice. Some would argue that it implies that more team chairs should be practicing teachers.

This does not mean that it is no longer important for a team to consider organizational issues or the knowledge and skills of school administrators. It means that a practitioner's knowledge of school management is more important, when management issues are viewed in relation to the central institutional purpose, rather than when they are seen as having an implicit value of their own. The new Statement of Purpose and the new standards are correct in calling for this change of emphasis.

(*Finding* # 2.8; SE # 1, SE # 10)

3. **Self-study activities that directly engage the school's actual practice of teaching and learning will strengthen this focus.**

The NEASC/CPSS self-study should expect schools to engage in activities of school-directed inquiry about the quality of its teaching and learning. Examples include: aligning curriculum to standards; examining student work; examining the school's standardized test scores to see what gaps and puzzles they suggest. Such a shift would strengthen the meaningful implementation of this focus on student learning. The new self-study design moves in this direction.

(*Finding* # 7.3)

4. **Problems in implementing the focus on student learning within the context of accreditation are related to the fact that American educators are inexperienced at considering student learning in any terms other than test-scores.**

The focus of the Statement of Purpose on student learning is consistent with the new national consensus. But it is subject to the difficulty American educators have in thinking and talking about it. Most avoid talking about teaching and learning as it actually happens in classrooms. It isn't often, even in faculty rooms, that teachers will talk about what happened as they practiced their profession that morning. When teachers (or other educators or members of the public) talk about their work, they are likely to talk in terms of abstract constructs, not in terms of the fascinating and messy patterns that happen or do not happen in real school life. If they talk about the actual life of the school, it tends to be about their own personal lives or that of their students, not about how much they or a student learned and why. When Americans talk about the work of schools, they are much more likely to talk about teaching as curriculum design, or as a pedagogical

strategy—such as teaching to different learning styles—without basing it in student learning. When asked about learning, most resort to talking about test scores, which have become the common language for discussing whether students have learned and what

American educators tend to think of teaching and learning as if it took place in a black-box. The historical basis for this is quite clear. It began in the early decades of this century, when the explosive growth in the numbers of American students and schools made it necessary to invent public school systems to absorb them more efficiency and consistently. Administrators and policy makers needed a way to think about a new "system" for managing schools. The research on learning underway in the developing schools of education relied heavily on the stimulus/response model, which provided the answer. The paradigm of inputs and outputs was quite simple. It spoke directly to the position of a person outside a school, who saw that his work was to improve what went on inside. The input-output approach suggested that, if one could find and implement the right inputs, the right outputs would happen.

Over time the ineffectiveness of this simplistic notion became apparent. This did not lead to restructuring the input-output paradigm, but to shifting the focus from inputs to outputs. Most accountability schemes have shifted their focus from inputs to results, and then held the schools accountable for them. The problem of the metaphor is deeper than that. Since it avoids the messy connections, it has little to say about them.

The new accreditation standards push NEASC/CPSS into unfamiliar territory. They imply that the connections that take place (or don't take place)—that is, the quality and nature of teaching and learning in the classroom—can be examined, talked about, judged and improved. Practicing teachers are the best people to make those connections. Language that will help make sense of what is actually happening between a teacher and a student will come, but it will come slowly.

The findings of this study strongly suggest that this new territory may not be as unfamiliar to NEASC/CPSS as it first appears. The history of NEASC, including its long debate on the meaning of membership and its insistence that its standards are qualitative, confirms that it never sought to function as most government agencies seem obligated to do. NEASC/CPSS has not waved test results as the only standard for

measuring school performance or as the criterion that will most effectively lead to school improvement.

This is not overtly clear, since NEASC/CPSS has focused its practitioner view of schools on school organization and administrative features, not on teaching and learning in the classrooms. NEASC/CPSS's new challenge is to find the way to use its practitioner perspective, as it sharpens its focus on student learning.

(*Finding* 1.5; SE # 1, SE # 3, SE #11.)

9. SUPPORTING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Introduction

Findings regarding this second thrust from the Statement of Purpose are presented here. These findings are supported by those from other areas, as well as by evidence from the *Sources of Evidence.*

Findings

1. School improvement is not a simple issue for NEASC/CPSS (or for anyone).

As discussed in the section on context, the Commission's long debate about how explicitly it should address school improvement has not yet been fully resolved. Some argue that it should limit its concern to one question, "Does the school adhere closely enough to the standards to warrant accreditation?"

While no one on the Commission or in the member schools thinks accreditation should oppose school improvement, the range and intensity of comments about school improvement suggest that other issues are tied to the discussion in an array that causes predictable uncertainty. The fact that the Association has endured a fifty-year debate about the adoption of accreditation as a process and that a central issue in that debate was how setting standards would change the relationship between schools and the Association suggests this has never been an easy issue.

These issues of the debate should be well articulated:

> What is school improvement anyway? Isn't it too often held out as an alternative to being accountable, and thus as a dodge to real accountability? Isn't it a mushy idea about process?
>
> Do explicit attempts from outside institutional boundaries, which are intended to make schools improve, result in real improvement?
>
> The Commission is a voluntary membership organization. When the Association adopted accreditation, the agreement between it and the member schools was that the schools would accept the standards as a basis for membership. The Commission would not intrude on them any more than necessary to carry out its

evaluation. If the Commission has an implicit or explicit agenda of "improving schools" then it must want to make them different from what they want to be. This line of reasoning leads to the question, "Doesn't trying to make schools consistent with the Commission's view violate the presumed autonomy of member schools?"

The earlier standards for accreditation focused on inputs. These were easy to analyze by reading documents and policies. Doesn't the change in focus to teaching and learning make the Commission too intrusive in the life of the school, e.g. visiting classes?

An early draft of the new Statement of Purpose required member schools to maintain "a proactive and on-going school improvement process...." In the final version this was changed to read, "by maintaining an adherence to the standards through a proactive and on-going school improvement process...." The final wording suggests that how a school conceives its school improvement process or how other agencies require the school to conceive that process is now under the influence of the Commission's standards. While this may sound more intrusive, that wasn't the intent of the Commission. It was simply stating again that its only concern was judging whether the school adhered to its standards.

Agencies that either monitor or support schools should continually discuss the relationship between monitoring and supporting. When an agency intends to do both, the tension is great. Yet, it is more productive to maintain that tension than to go one way or the other. Monitoring without support becomes regulation without purpose. Support without monitoring becomes flaccid and unconnected to the realities of how well things are going.

The Commission must reengage the old issue of defining the proper balance between support and monitoring in order to become clear. It must replace its historic discussion about the relationship between member schools with a new conversation about how to shape the proper balance between monitoring and support so that it becomes consistent with its public function and its current Statement of Purpose.

(*Section on Historical Context*, SE # 2, SE # 15)

2. **Self-study is the primary lever for school improvement.**

As the earlier findings on self-study indicate, of all the accreditation process components, it probably has the single highest potential for positively influencing ongoing school improvement. It seems sensible to allow each component of the accreditation process to do what it does best. Thus, the design of this component should receive the particular attention of the Commission as it seeks to forward school improvement.

It is reasonable to conclude that much of the basis for criticizing the older form of the self-study was that it did not support well the internal school functions that are necessary for school improvement. The new Self-Assessment was judged potentially to be much more effective in this regard. Not only does it require more meaningful analysis on the part of the school, but also it points much more directly toward building plans for action.

(*Findings* # 2.6, 3.3)

3. **Modifications in other components of the process would strengthen how well accreditation supports school improvement.**

During discussion about the Review of Standards, the question arose about whether school improvement should become an explicit standard. Should a school be required to demonstrate that it is doing what it can to assure that its performance will improve? Either an "Improvement Standard" or a clear statement of the Commission's position on the relationship between school improvement and the standards should be addressed in the next round of standard review.

The visit process supports improvement since it is an almost inherent part of the inquiry process. The central questions of a visiting team are:

> How well is this school doing?
>
> What can it do to improve?
>
> How do we say what we say so that its implications for this school will more likely result in improvement?

This clarification would raise the team's consciousness about improvement.

In addition, limiting the number of its recommendations and charging the team to include only those deemed most important would also strengthen the role of visit. This would become an incentive to the team to present a limited and coherent set of recommendations to the school, which the school would be more likely to follow. Too often team members justify a recommendation as something that the school wants, rather than as something that the team thinks will matter. The team's current use of evidence to support its recommendations, rather than its perceptions, encourages this incorrect analysis.

The school should be required to respond briefly to the visiting team's report. A two-page response would indicate how it views the report and what it plans to do in light of it. This moves the spotlight back to the school and on what the school will do in response to the report to advance its functioning. The school's response and the Commission's judgment of the validity and strength of its response should then carry important weight in the Commission's decisions about that school's status.

Requiring a school to respond to the visiting team's report would also provide a better basis for the Commission to decide what recommendations to make to the school both when it granted accreditation and when it responded to two- and five-year progress reports. Two other changes in the follow-up process would strengthen the support of school improvement:

Add a follow-up activity in year seven.

Find ways to rely less on reports that schools write only for the Commission. The Commission might build a reporting process that takes advantage of other reporting the school must do about how well it is meeting a district or state required improvement plan.

(*Finding* # 4.1

10. STRENGTHENING THE RIGOR OF THE PROCESS

Introduction

Findings regarding this third thrust from the Statement of Purpose are presented here. These findings are supported by those from other areas, as well as by evidence from the *Sources of Evidence*.

Findings

1. **The visit is the primary lever for strengthening the rigor of the process.**

   When the Commission accepts the visit as a methodology for knowing a school, it will be much easier to strengthen the rigor of the visit. The visit then becomes a powerful tool for strengthening the rigor of the whole accreditation process.

   What can be done to ensure that the team learns what is important and that its conclusions are accurate? The answer is simple:

   > **Pay attention to the procedures of the visit as a method of inquiry.**

   The following examples from *Foundations of the Visit* should be considered to strengthen rigor:

   > Emphasize in the visit protocol, team training, and the guidance for team chairs that the visit is a methodology and that the team is expected to follow it. Making that change will be difficult. The methodology is in fact quite simple; it is not difficult to learn. But using it as a discipline won't happen unless the visit methodology is central to the team's sense of what its work and process are about.
   >
   > A brief description might read like this:
   >
   > > The team's job is to learn about the actual life of the school so it can write accurate and fair conclusions about how well the school meets the standards. These conclusions and the evidence that supports them must be agreed upon by all team members.

As guardian of the method, the team chair's job to see that the team uses the method well and fully. Although delivering the team report is the chair's most critical task, the chair's first responsibility is to oversee that the team performs its inquiry as well as it can.

While differing styles of chair leadership can add to the process, all team chairs must see that their style is in the service of their central function—oversight of the method. Rules for evidence and conclusions should be consistently followed by all.

The team should be limited to the number of conclusions, commendations and recommendations it presents. This instills the rigor of having to choose what is most important for the team to say and diminishes the likelihood that team members will bargain: "I will agree to your recommendation if you will agree to mine."

Reduce the time necessary for the team to "write" the report by reducing the size of the report. Although this is an important discipline, a team currently spends too much time writing at the expense of observing in the school and reaching agreement on its conclusions.

The term "perceptions" should be changed to "conclusions" or "findings." Evidence should support the conclusions, not the recommendations.

Consider how to use computer technology to serve the visit processes, not distract from them. Using a LCD projector for writing the report reduces the need for various drafts in various formats and keeps the team focused on making a single draft accurate.

Sharpening the focus on teaching and learning requires the team to spend much more time observing actual teaching and learning. It is more important to observe complete classes, than all teachers in a school. Nevertheless, it is possible to do both.

The final team business should be an open discussion to construct its recommendation about whether a school should be accredited or not. That decision should be reported by the team chair to the Commission. While the Commission should certainly review the team's decision, and if necessary ask the chair about

it, the chair should not undercut the team's judgment, unless the chair believes the team has clearly not followed the visit procedures.

The team chair should not see the team as doing the work so she/he can write the report. Rather the chair makes it possible for the team to write the report, which includes supporting the team to make unanimous decisions. That is a major source of the rigor of the visit.

The procedures and policies related to the production of the report should build its legitimacy as a certain, legitimate and useful document. For example, if it is not finished when the team disbands, the final wording should be available to all team members for a short time, so every member can say that all conclusions and recommendations in the report have been subjected to the rigor of team consensus.

Each report should include a preface that describes the nature and purpose of the report, explaining the basis for its legitimacy.

(*Findings* # 2.1, 2.8)

Changes in other components will also strengthen rigor.

Requiring schools to build conclusions in the self-study that are supported by evidence will strengthen the rigor of the self-study.

(*Finding # 7.3*)

If the Commission considers more deliberately how well the process that produced the team's report was carried out, the rigor of its review of team or school reports will increase. Statements to the public that clarify the process of accreditation as a legitimate approach to judging schools will also end up supporting increased rigor in the process.

(*Findings* # 4.3)

11. STENGTHENING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE COMMISSION'S VOICE

Introduction

Findings regarding this fourth thrust from the Statement of Purpose are presented here. These findings are supported by those from other areas, as well as by evidence from the *Sources of Evidence*

Findings

1. **Since serving the public interest is now the central rationale for its work, the Commission is required to speak up.**

   The Commission has been quiet about what it does, about what it stands for, about what it thinks good practice is and about what makes good public education policy possible.

   While it might be possible to defend this stance in an earlier, quieter day, the Commission's lack of voice at this time is a serious loss to the public, to its member schools and to its organizational vitality. This quiet stance weakens the Commission's position with its own members, who admit they are ignorant of its purpose and process or have misconceptions about it. The Statement of Purpose, the effectiveness of the accreditation process and even the healthy survival of a voluntary association—all require the Commission to find and use its public voice.

   (*Finding* # 6.2)

2. **What the Commission does will speak louder than any press release or database.**

   As the Commission has discovered, the tough action of withholding accreditation from a school generates much more attention than a general press release or an education database. Making fair and tough decisions well, acting consistently in the application of procedures and continuously strengthening the rigor of the whole process will make a difference.

   The Commission's belief in the rigor and value of accreditation is crucial. The Commission too often appears defensive about the value of the basic process of accreditation. Such an attitude about the strength

and legitimacy of the process assures its demise. The accreditation process should not be hidden under a bushel basket. It holds up well under public, scientific or legal scrutiny.

The Commission will best strengthen its confidence by strengthening the rigor of the process (just as ETS has done with its testing methodologies).

The Commission will strengthen its voice by exploring more fully the legal basis for the legitimacy of both its reports and its professional judgment.

The Commission will strengthen its voice by improving its procedures to address the day-to-day questions about the process, particularly when accreditation is challenged at some level, whether by a school that has been denied accreditation or by a researcher's positive or negative report on the effects of accreditation.

The Commission will strengthen its voice by organizing a limited series of presentations and discussions with New England State Departments of Education about:

The strengths and limits of accreditation

The value of a practitioner-based approach and how that complements the approach of government agencies

The noted effect of their state policies on member schools

How they can work effectively together.

While new working relationships may possibly unfold from this, that should not be the explicit purpose for these organized discussions. Nevertheless, possibilities for useful collaboration that use the different organizational characteristics in ways that are effective to their common goal, improvement in student learning, should be explored and acted upon.

The Commission will strengthen its voice by engaging other regional accrediting organizations in discussions of issues about the meaning, rigor and effectiveness of accreditation as a process.

(Finding # 6.2)

3. The Commission should inform the public about the meaning and value of accreditation.

NEASC/CPSS should become a strong advocate of the value of its accreditation process in the current context of American school accountability. It should be clear about the limits of the process, as well as an advocate for its strengths, including the value of practitioner-set standards and using practitioner judgment as the basis for deciding how well schools are doing.

The Commission knows through its practice how standards work and don't work to help schools improve. It knows the ins and outs of conducting school visits. It knows the value to schools of a practitioner process for judging how well schools are doing.

(*Finding* # 6.2; SE # 11)

CONCLUSION

This document is not intended to provide one simple conclusion but a set of ideas that will converge at different levels to stimulate and provoke the Commission as it charts its course at this time.

It is clear that the Commission faces new issues and possibilities. It is a time when with effort it can "make its future ... equal to its opportunity."

There is strong public agreement that schools must improve and that there must be dramatic increase in the learning of American students. The national call for school accountability challenges the 100-year-old American tradition of school accreditation to review and revise its process to fit the new landscape. A possibility rests in that challenge that the Commission will establish the central process of accreditation as a method for understanding and judging the quality of practice in schools, not as an evolving set of administrative procedures. Because the Commission's work has been in the right direction since 1991, this strengthens the possibility that it can successfully redesign its process.

The Commission faces the challenge of transforming accreditation into a modern, practitioner approach to monitoring and supporting schools. If the Commission succeeds, if it maintains the essence of its practitioner traditions, it will make its future equal to its opportunity.

The Commission could promote the continuous improvement of teaching and learning in our schools by deepening our understanding of how practice works and the role that practitioners can effectively play in improving their practice. From that understanding we could build accountability systems that would support the development of practitioner judgment and knowledge. If the Commission promoted the continuous improvement of teaching and learning in our schools, through methods of accountability that actually increased our knowledge of teaching and learning as a practice, that would result in a much healthier state of affairs than what we have now.

The Commission would increase the possibility of making a remarkable contribution to American public education by engendering a practitioner voice into the national discussion about how our schools can best serve our children. It could change how we discuss the nature of teaching and learning.

Instead of entering the argument about which reform constructs are the most effective, it would engender a simpler discussion about a much more complex subject—the nature of actual practice.

It could change how we discuss the nature of teaching and learning. Instead of arguing about which reform constructs are the most effective now, it can engender a simpler discussion about a much more complex subject—the nature of actual practice.

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Rhode Island Department of Education, School Accountability for Learning and Teaching (SALT) The Coalition to Improve Education in South Shore (Chicago)

National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE)

Annenberg Institute for School Reform

ENGLISH SCHOOL INSPECTORS

APPENDIX

SOURCES OF EVIDENCE

1. Observation of six complete NEASC/CSS school accreditation visits

Overview:

Between February and May 1997 the Principal Investigator (PI) observed six complete schools visits carried out by regular NEASC/CPSS visiting teams. Each visit started Sunday afternoon and ended Wednesday afternoon.

Schools were selected to provide a range of schools and visiting teams within the limited time frame. Schools were in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts and two in Rhode Island.

Source-of-Evidence Steps:

1. The Principal Investigator observed all team meetings during the visit.
2. He observed most members of each team as they collected evidence in the school.
3. He conducted interviews with the team chair and conversations with all team members, the school principal and other school participants.
4. He entered notes into a laptop computer on progress of the meeting and the issues addressed related to study issues. When a laptop was not appropriate, he wrote his notes on legal pads. Each visit produced about 150 pages of notes.
5. He collected all school documents used by the team, as well as all handouts for the team from the chair and team members. Drafts of the team report during each visit and later a copy of the final report of each visit were also collected.
6. All observations were conducted under an agreement of confidentiality with both the school and the team. (School names and the names of team chairs are included in the acknowledgments.)
7. This aource-of-evidence was of particular importance to findings in the focus area, *The Accreditation School Visit.*

2. Observation of self-study activities in five schools

Overview:

In 1997 a NEASC/CPSS member school that is scheduled for a decennial visit would begin its self-study two years before the visit. As described in the *NEASC/CPSS Accreditation Handbook,* schools follow a fairly well established series of steps to complete the self-study. These are spread out over the two-year period.

The original study design called for the PI to spend a day at each of four schools that were in different stages of self-study. The schedule at each of these schools was set so that the PI could observe a school self-study activity (e.g. meeting of the Steering Committee), giving him time to interview and discuss the self-study process with several school participants. This usually included the principal and Self-Study Steering Committee.

This resulted in observation of the following self-study events:

Early planning meeting of a Steering Committee

Speaker phone conference call between the Director of the Commission and school participants working on the self-study, including the school principal, members of the school's Steering Committee and members of the school's Statement of Purpose Standard Committee. The telephone call concerned the school's questions regarding the Commission's intent in its Statement of Purpose standard.

Faculty meeting to approve the school's prepared summaries for each standard.

Curriculum and Instruction Standard Committee.

A meeting of the Steering Committee after the visit to reflect on the whole process.

When it was apparent to the PI that self-study was more critical to this study than first planned, additional activities were added to the design.

As part of the PI's responsibilities in a different project, the development of the Rhode Island SALT plan, he worked with two elementary schools and one high school in Rhode Island as

they prepared NEASC self-studies. The two elementary schools were seeking accreditation from the Commission on Elementary Schools. Work ranged from one day to ten days in each school. It was decided to include in this study's *Sources-of-Evidence* relevant evidence from this work on self-study.

All observations of the school visit included conversations with school participants about the self-study. This evidence was also included in this source-of-evidence.

Self-study evidence was collected throughout the 1997 calendar year.

All evidence collected at schools was collected under agreements of confidentiality.

Source-of-Evidence Steps:

1. The Principal Investigator arranged logistics for observation and interviews with considerable assistance from Commission staff.
2. He conducted observations, interviews and discussions at school sites.
3. He recorded notes on a laptop.
4. He collected relevant documents and drafts at each site.
5. The initial findings on self-study were reviewed by working sessions. Particular attention was accorded the findings at the sessions held at schools.
6. This source of evidence was of particular importance in the focus area, *Self-Study*.

3. Observation of and participation in Commission meetings

Overview:

As described in the focus area, *Decision-Making*, the Commission ("Board") meets quarterly. These are "private meetings." The PI was invited to be a guest at the following meetings:

June 22-23, 1997

September 27, 1997

January 24-25, 1998

March 29-30, 1998

On Sunday afternoon the Commission Review Committees worked on review reports from schools to prepare a recommendation on each one for the business meeting on Monday morning. At the June and September 97 meetings the PI followed the progress of the decision making for the schools whose visits he had observed.

He presented the design of this study at the January 24, 1998 session and conducted two working sessions on the initial study findings with commission members at the March 29-30, 1998 meeting.

He observed the full Monday morning business session at all four meetings.

In addition, he was invited to the Commission's Leadership Council on June 28, 1998 and to present a briefing about this report at a workshop session of the Association's annual meeting on December 4, 1998.

Source-of-Evidence Steps:

1. Principal Investigator observed and participated in meetings as indicated above.
2. He talked with many Commission members.
3. He entered notes in a laptop on the progress of meetings and the issues addressed related to the study issues.
4. He collected documents relevant to the meeting.
5. Analysis of notes contributed to findings, particularly those in the focus area, *Decision Making*.
6. All notes were collected under an agreement of confidentiality.
7. Commission members reviewed the initial study findings at the working session in March 1998. Reactions were carefully considered in the preparation of the final findings. This source of evidence was of particular importance to findings in the focus area, *Decision-Making*.

4. Observation of and participation in the work of the Commission's Standards Review Committee

Overview:

This Committee was convened by the Director to begin the regular five-year review of standards. Chaired by Robert Mackin, its members were drawn from member schools and two member school districts. In addition three members were from the Commission's professional staff. (Committee members are listed in the Appendix).

In Fall 1997, prior to the first meeting, Commission staff sought comments from all member schools on how the existing standards might be improved. Many schools responded.

The Committee decided at its first meeting that its task was not only to revise the wording of the standards, but to reconsider their structure, organization and function in the accreditation process.

The LAB at Brown supported the Committee's work as an integral part of this study. The LAB engaged four national experts on standards and school reform to prepare extensive critique of the existing standards and to comment on a draft of the 2000 Standards.

The Committee met eight times from April 1997 to February 1998 (April 30, 1997, May 30, July 10-11, August 5, September 17, December 12, January 21, 1998).

The Committee began by considering several major issues: the function of standards in accreditation including how schools respond to the current set, the latest research and policy work on school characteristics that support effective learning (*Breaking Ranks* was the primary reference point here.), the critique of the expert panel.

The proposed standards from the Committee were sent out to all member schools for comment, reviewed at six regional meetings for members held by Commission staff throughout New England in February and early March and approved by the Commission in March 1998.

Source-of-Evidence Steps:

1. The Principal Investigator observed and participated in all meetings.

2. He conducted interviews and carried out conversations with most members of the Committee.

3. He kept notes on a laptop on the progress of meetings and issues they addressed related to study issues.

4. He conducted the review of the standards by the panel of experts (Listed in the Appendix).

5. He prepared the following memos about issues related to standard construction based on initial findings of the study. Memos are included in the report's supplement: *Source-of-Evidence Documents.*

   October 26, 1996, *Review of Extant Standards of the NEASC Commission on Public Secondary Schools.*

   April 24, 1997, *Standard queries.*

   October 1, 1997, *What the Experts Say about Current CPSS Standards (Final Version)*

   July 2, 1997, *Recommendations.*

   December 12, 1997, *The Panel of Experts Reacts to Draft of 2000 Standards.*

6. Notes were analyzed. This source of evidence was of particular importance to findings in the focus area, *The Effectiveness of the 1998 Review Process.*

5. Observation of and participation in the work of the Commission's Self-Study Review Committee

Overview:

This Committee met as part of the normal five-year cycle of NEASC/CPSS standards review. The standards were developed during 1997 and approved at the March 1998 Board meeting. This Committee's task was to develop the materials that would support schools to use the new standards in their self-study.

The 2000 Standards represent a major change for the schools. Therefore, it was decided to conduct a review that would go beyond the

usual review of self-study materials and would include rethinking the purpose and process of self-study.

The Director appointed a committee, chaired by Jacqueline G. Soychak, of eight participants, including staff and representatives of member schools. (The list of members is included in the Appendix.) The Committee met on four days in 1998. (June 5 and July 7& 8, 20). Considerable drafting work took place between meetings.

Recognizing the critical importance of this committee's work, the LAB at Brown provided support for some of the costs of its work.

The committee considered the purpose for the self-study, the important implications of the new standards for the self-study and prepared drafts of guidance for schools embarked on a self-study with the 2000 Standards. The staff edited and completed the guidance materials. The Commission Board reviewed them and they were distributed to schools in September 1998.

Source-of-Evidence Steps:

1. Principal Investigator observed and participated in all meetings.
2. He prepared a memo about issues of self-study design based on the initial findings of this study. The memo is included in this report's *Supplement of Relevant Documents.*
3. He carried out conversations with most members of the committee.
4. He entered notes into a laptop on progress of meeting and the issues addressed related to this study.
5. Notes were analyzed. This source of evidence was of particular importance for findings in the focus area, *The Effectiveness of the 1998 Review Process.*

6. Observation of and participation in Training Workshops for Team Chairs

Overview:

NEASC/CPSS holds an annual training workshop for team chairs at the end of July. The workshop provides presentation and working sessions on specific issues that chairs face.

The PI was invited to observe and participate in the 1997 and 1998 workshops.

Source-of-Evidence Steps:

1. The Principal Investigator observed and participated in these two sessions.
2. He conducted interviews and carried out conversations with several chairs, including those who chaired the teams he observed.
3. He entered notes into a laptop on progress of meeting and the issues addressed related to the study.
4. This source of evidence was particularly important to findings in the focus area, *The Accreditation School Visit.*

7. Interviews of national experts on history of accreditation, school standards and legal issues

Overview:

As already described under the *Sources-of-Evidence* related to the Standards Review Committee, the PI interviewed four national experts on issues related to the development of effective standards. They are listed in the Acknowledgements.

Source-of-Evidence Steps

1. Each was sent a brief description of the study goals, the existing NEASC/CPSS standards, and a description of their task including interview questions. Each spent a day preparing answers to the questions.

2. The PI interviewed each by phone. Interviews ranged from 2-3 hours. The interviews were recorded and the PI took notes.

3. A draft of the memo, "What the Experts Say about Current NEASC/CPSS Standards" was prepared by the PI and reviewed by each expert. The final memo was prepared.

4. Each expert was later sent a copy of the draft standards and asked to review them.

5. Following a second phone interview, the PI prepared a Power-Point presentation (December 12, 1997) for the Standards Committee.

6. This was an important source of evidence for the focus area, *Effectiveness of the Review Process*. The memos and report resulting from it are included in the supplementary volume, *Sources-of-Evidence Documents*.

In addition the PI interviewed the public member of the Commission's Board, who is a lawyer and who provides advice to the Commission on legal issues. His purpose was to learn the legal status of professional judgment and of the team's report. In addition the legal issues resulting from the private/public organizational nature of the Commission and Association were discussed.

Finally, he interviewed two students of accreditation and its history. The legal expert was interviewed in person and the historical experts by phone. Notes were taken.

These notes were a source of evidence for the *Context* section.

8. Compilation of *Bibliography on Accreditation*

Overview:

This Bibliography is a good start at compiling a comprehensive bibliography. Most of it was compiled between April and October of 1997. The starting points were bibliographies of NEASC publications and a thesis on NEASC accreditation.

Extensive searching was done of ERIC, Dissertation Abstracts and other education databases.

Titles were eliminated, if accreditation was used only to describe an institution and the source was not about accreditation.

A few recent works were added in 1998.

The Bibliography is included in the supplementary volume, *Source-of-Evidence Documents.*

9. Constructing *Steps of the NEASC/CPSS Visit*

Overview:

It was important to ground the analysis of the visit in this set of steps that describe how it currently takes place. Not only do the steps provide a base for this analysis, but also they more closely represent the prevalent approach to describing the visit.

The PI constructed these steps from his notes of observations during the early visits and from the NEASC/CPSS *Handbook for Chairs.* From that point, the list was revised a number of times by:

Observations of the remaining visits;

Informal and formal feedback from chairs and NEASC/CPSS staff during visits; chair training workshops and working sessions.

The final list is the result of four full drafts and represents a high degree of certainty. It is used as a source of evidence in several focus areas, but most notably *The Visit.* The final list follows. It is also included in this report's supplementary volume, *Source-of-Evidence Documents.*

The steps of the NEASC/CPSS Accreditation Visit

These steps represent as fully as possible the actual practice of the visit. Most of these steps are based on PI observations. The steps for the visit have been carefully refined through conversations with visiting committee chairs and with staff.

Important steps that were not directly observed are indicated by an *.

The steps are presented from the vantage point of a NEASC staff member. Many steps overlap and the process is not as linear as this presentation suggests.

1. *NEASC/CPSS staff member proposes to the school principal a chair of the visiting team. That process is repeated to select an assistant chair. The principal must approve the selection.
2. *NEASC/CPSS staff builds the membership of the visiting team from practitioner volunteers. The principal reviews the candidates and may eliminate candidates. Membership of a team is expected to include four administrators, six to nine classroom teachers, a student service representative, an educational media specialist, and when available, a representative of the state's department of education, colleges or the public.
3. *The chair (and sometimes the assistant chair) meets with the school.
4. The school sends its completed self-study to team members. The team chair sends initial work assignments to team members, which usually includes additional NEASC/CPSS materials describing the visit process. Each member is assigned usually to at least one standard, trying to match the professional expertise of team members.
5. *Team members prepare by reviewing the self-study and the visit materials they receive from the chair and the school.
6. *Team members make arrangements to travel to the school and to be away for four days.

7. The team meets for orientation at the school on Sunday afternoon.

8. The chair reviews the team schedule, their work assignments and adjusts individual assignments as necessary. An assignment to a standard implies responsibility for coordinating the collection of information about that standard, preparation of drafts of the team report on that standard and presentation of them for review by and the approval of the full team.

9. On Sunday team members and school members (usually the school's Self-Study Steering Committee, augmented by additional faculty) are introduced to each other. The team is escorted on a tour of the facility. The school gives the team a dinner and makes a presentation about the school.

10. During the next three days the team and the school people engage in pre-arranged interviews and meetings at the school.

11. In addition most team members engage in numerous informal conversations, frequently initiated by school participants who have a question or wish to make a point. Each faculty member has the opportunity to complete a confidential questionnaire. These are carefully reviewed by the team.

12. Team members visit classrooms briefly. The target is to visit each teacher's class briefly (5-15 minutes). No notes are taken in classes.

13. Team member(s) assigned to a standard will draft a report on that standard.

14. Each standard report is organized into four sections: description, perceptions, commendations and recommendations. Much of the description is taken from the school's self-study, but that is now "verified" by the team.

15. The chair will usually ask the team to discuss its general perceptions of school.

16. The visiting team discusses each draft of the reports on the ten standards.

17. The original members who drafted the standard reports revise their drafts, based on the team's discussion and its decisions about what should be changed.

18. The team usually discusses the substance, and sometimes much of the wording, of final drafts and comes to agreement on that.

19. Using a four-point scale (Excellent, good, fair and poor) team members, who have prepared the report on a standard, will recommend the rating for how well the school meets that standard. The team discusses and agrees on a rating. This discussion is usually quite thorough.

20. Each team member votes by secret ballot on what accreditation action he recommends. While chairs normally take time to explain the possible choices, the actual vote is not discussed. The team does not make a formal team recommendation regarding the school's accreditation status. Some chairs ask the team to discuss what they are thinking, but not their actually votes.

21. Team members complete their work. which includes preparing internal evaluative forms on the visit and on the chairs. Certificates of Appreciation are awarded. Occasionally an round-the-table feedback session takes place about the experience. Most team members express strong positive comments about the experience and its professional value. The team disbands.

22. The chair gives an oral report on the team's overall findings to the school faculty on Wednesday afternoon.

23. The chair prepares the draft report. At the same time the chair prepares his written comments (blue checklist). The chair reports in this document the team's agreed upon rating for each standard and the results of the team's secret ballot on accreditation action.

    The chair's report concludes with overall comments and recommendation for accreditation action by the Commission. The chair highlights recommendations and commendations that need special attention by the Commission. The Commission is most likely to emphasize these to the school.

24. *NEASC/CPSS staff and its outside editor edit the draft report for clarity and consistency. These edits are discussed with the

chair, who sends the draft to the principal no later than 10 weeks after the visit.

25. *The principal and chair either meet do discuss any concerns the principal has with the text of the report or they discuss this matter on the phone or in writing.

26. *Following receipt of the principal's response, the chair prepares the final report, which the chair submits to NEASC/CPSS.

10. Preparing *Foundations of the Visit* (Catalpa Ltd.)

Foundations of the Visit provides a substantive template for considering the NEASC/CPSS Accreditation Visit. It presents the fundamental characteristics of the visit as a method for knowing schools. It is built from seven years of studying the visit as it works in England, NEASC/CPSS, and SALT.

Its origins are described in the focus area, *Introduction of the Visit* and in the introduction to the document itself. It was used as a source of evidence for the focus area, *The Accreditation School Visit.*

Foundations of the Visit is included at the end of this report. It is also included in this report's supplementary volume, *Source-of-Evidence Documents.*

11. Analysis of documents on the history of both NEASC and the Commission

As described in the text in the *Context* section of this report, the documents on the history of the Association, the Commission and even of American accreditation are notably scant. The documents used as sources of evidence in this report, notably for the *Context* section are included in the report's *Cited References,* which appears before the Appendix.

12. Analysis of guides prepared by NEASC/CPSS

The handbooks prepared by NEASC/CPSS—for schools who are engaged in the decennial evaluation and for team chairs—are well done. They provide a valuable written record of the process, at least as it is expected to be done.

The analysis of guides has continued throughout this study for different purposes including:

Providing information about both the visit and the self-study during the observations

Checking the *Steps* and *Foundations*

Noting changes from the revisions

They were used as sources of evidence for all the focus areas considering the process itself.

They are included in both the *Report References* in the Appendix to this document and in the Bibliography.

13. Review of handbooks and guides from other American accrediting associations and other school-visit protocols

The review of American accreditation guides was perfunctory. Most are listed in the Bibliography.

The review of other school-visit protocols was thorough. They were used as a source of evidence primarily for *Foundations.*

14. Feedback from chairs of the observed visiting teams regarding the initial findings of the study

At a special session for that purpose this study's first written analyses of the visit were reviewed during the 1997 training session by most of the chairs of the six teams that were observed. Many of the chairs also participated in the working session feedback on initial findings in Spring 1998.

Their feedback was a source of evidence mostly for the focus area, *The Accreditation School Visit.*

15. Feedback from ten working session discussions about the initial findings of the study.

Overview:

The working sessions were carried out as an activity of this study.

Working session participants included members of schools' self-study committees, school participants who had served on a visiting team, Commission members, state department representatives and members of the national educational research and policy community.

The best overview of the sessions themselves is excerpts from the explanation that was given to participants:

> You have been asked to take part in an unusual event. You will be one of about 100 people who have agreed to review the first draft of conclusions from this exploratory research study that seeks to understand how public school accreditation can be improved.
>
> This *Briefing Book* is an integral part of the *Study of Accreditation*, a two year exploratory research project of the LAB at Brown. It presents the provisional conclusions of this study.
>
> **Your task is to scrutinize these conclusions and to discuss them in the session with me and the other members of your working group.**

The exploratory nature of the research and the potential influence of its conclusions on New England public schools turned me to this somewhat unorthodox research exercise.

The working group sessions provided a chance to discuss the validity, utility and implications of my conclusions with school practitioners and other interested groups. The first working group was a cross-section of New England educators, working with the LAB on secondary school restructuring. Our discussion strongly supported the value of the working group sessions to the research purposes.

Based on working group sessions that will be held in March 1998,and my continuing analysis, I will prepare the final documents of the study. We plan to send each participant a copy of the final documents. It is important for their integrity that this *Briefing Book* not be copied, circulated or used in any way, except as the key document for the working group sessions.

The format of most that follows is a detailed outline, which leaves out description and examples of evidence. I have deliberately tried to present my findings in a way that will work best for the working sessions, eschewing the traditional conventions of the research monograph. It is a different way of working.

The purpose for the working sessions is to check what is here in the *Briefing Book* against the understanding of others, particularly those who participate in public school accreditation or are affected by it.

The outcome of this exercise is **not** to build a document that warrants everyone's agreement. It is to increase my certainty that:

- As a researcher, the findings are close to right
- As a writer, they are presented clearly and persuasively.

The final documents will owe a great deal to the working session participants.

Source-of-Evidence Steps:

Jan.–Feb. 1998 Prepared *Briefing Book* for the sessions. The original version was modified twice during the sessions.

The final version is included in this report's *Supplement of Relevant Documents.*

150 people attended the nine sessions:

Group	Location	Date
LAB's Secondary Schools Initiative	LAB	February 25, 1998
Annenberg Institute; Brown Ed Department	LAB	March 11, 1998
NEASC Staff	Bedford MA	March 13, 1998
Vermont State Department	Burlington VT	March 16, 1998
Sohegan (NH),	Amherst NH	March 17, 1998
Pilgrim (RI),	Warwick RI	March 18, 1998
State Department Reps	LAB	March 20, 1998
English (MA),	Boston MA	March 23, 1998
NEASC/CPSS Commission.	Danvers MA	March 29-30, 1998

May 1998 Prepared "Notes from Working Sessions" to summarize comments from sessions.

June 1998 Prepared first draft of this report, beginning with the *Briefing Book* as modified by information from the working sessions.

Major points

These sessions were immensely helpful in unearthing errors of fact, omissions and various opinions on the value of findings.

The most important issue was about whether the shift to school improvement was away from the purpose of traditional accreditation

practice and the value of making that shift. There was strong agreement on the value of changing the self-study.

Overall the description of the steps of the visit and other aspects of the visit were considered accurate and seen as helpful.

16. Feedback from NEASC/CPSS staff

Overview:

Feedback and support from the Commission's staff was continuous throughout the project. The Director reviewed drafts of the *Briefing Book* and an early draft of this report for comment on incorrect information and suggestions for how to present the Findings in effective ways to the various constituent groups of the Commission.

Foundations of
The Catalpa School Visit

Thomas A. Wilson, Ed. D.

A Catalpa Handbook
3RD Edition
March 1999

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FOREWORD

Visiting schools can be a much better way to learn about how well they are performing than our current methods.

The important difficulties we face in improving schools are directly tied to the deficiencies in how we know them. The Visit can generate legitimate knowledge about schools that directly relates to what school practitioners (teachers and staff) must do differently in their daily work to improve teaching and learning.

Changing the daily habits of what teachers and learners actually do is at the heart of improving the practice of teaching and learning. Over the last ten years American school reformers have found that it is most difficult to make changes "where the rubber hits the road," because there has been no satisfactory way to weigh and consider the quality of actual practice. The Visit can fill that vacuum.

Early evidence (primarily in the SALT initiative, Rhode Island Department of Education) suggests that, when designers of accountability systems include the Visit, they have many more options because knowledge garnered from the Visit increases what is possible. Because this knowledge is tied more directly to actual school practice, it is possible to design accountability systems that more directly support the improvement of teaching and learning within schools.

Since the primary purpose of the Visit is to generate knowledge about a school that will improve its practice, what the Visit contributes to both school support and accountability efforts will be determined by how well it generates that knowledge.

We know very little about the methodology of the Visit. Americans think of it as an administrative process, not as a methodology for generating knowledge. Because the Visit has evolved in practice, we cannot understand the elements that make it up without first understanding how it actually works.

Recent designers have used some of the features of the Visit; while discarding others. They have not considered it as a methodology, but as a tool that can be adapted to their purposes. They perceive the Visit as one of several strategies that might help teachers. This superficial understanding does not

forward it as a legitimate method for generating important knowledge about a school. The prevalence of this well-intentioned, but largely mistaken, perspective strengthens the importance of understanding how the Visit works. With that understanding it can be designed to meet the needs of different situations without forfeiting its strength as a method.

When the method of the Visit becomes clear, teachers will understand that this way of constructing conclusions about the quality of school practice is, at heart, a practitioner's way of knowing and judging. They will come to realize that the method of the Visit deeply respects their knowledge, craft, judgment and interest, because it is built *from* them. Because that respect is real, they will not struggle to protect themselves from criticism, but will engage in the passionate pursuit to increase their understanding of how their daily practice works and how they can improve it. That passion is the mark of a professional. Furthermore, it earns public respect.

The practical purpose of this document is to strengthen current efforts to plan and conduct school Visits. It will be a useful guide for anyone who is designing or refining applications that include the Visit. It is based on Catalpa's six-year study of the Visit process, including American accreditation, which involved carefully examining what happens during actual school Visits in a variety of contexts. It is based on a four-year observation of two important examples of the Visit in practice:

- Accreditation Visits, as practiced by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges' Commission on Public Secondary Schools (NEASC/CPSS). While the protocol for the Visit differs from that used by other accreditation agencies, it is part of the American accreditation tradition.

  This study, which is still in progress, is a project of the Northeast and Islands Regional Laboratory At Brown University (LAB).

- The traditional (1839-1992) system of national school inspection used in England (HMI and LEA Inspection).

  Supported by a number of foundations, this study is reported in *Reaching for a Better Standard: English School Inspection and the Dilemma of Accountability for American Public Schools* (Teachers College Press, 1996). Complete acknowledgments are provided there.

In addition, my work with the following initiatives (as a designer of the Visit and as a Visiting Team Coach) to apply the methodology of the Visit

to American school accountability and improvement has contributed greatly to this handbook:

- Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE).
  School Accountability for Learning and Teaching (SALT).

  SALT is a comprehensive, statewide strategy to reshape education accountability so that it works effectively. For the last five years RIDE has worked on designing and implementing SALT, which is based on a set of 10 principles about how accountability would work at all levels within a state, if accountability were implemented effectively.

  RIDE staff and many Rhode Island teachers, principals, and citizens participated in the pilot of the a SALT Visit protocol. Rhode Island is conducting 21 Visits for 1998-99, as it implements a strategy to visit every school in the state. This work has contributed greatly to my understanding of the Visit, including how it can make a large accountability system much more effective.

  The LAB At Brown supports a portion of my work with RIDE.

- National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE)
  Professional Development Schools (PDS) Standards Project

  Phase I of this project (supported by a grant from the AT&T Foundation) resulted in a new set of standards for Professional Development Schools (PDS). Phase II (currently underway and supported by the DeWitt Wallace Reader's Digest Fund) will result in a specially designed assessment process that includes a Visit protocol. It will be piloted in 20 PDS sites around the country.

- Coalition for Improved Education in (Chicago's) South Shore (CIESS)
  Authentic Community-Based Accountability

- Annenberg Institute for School Reform (AISR)
  The Boston Pilot Schools Evaluation Project

- Illinois State Board of Education
  Quality School Review (QSR)

- Minneapolis Public Schools and the Panasonic Foundation
  Quality Improvement Process (QIP)

- SchoolWorks
  The Charter Renewal Visit for Massachusetts Charter Schools

If we build protocols for the school Visit that treat the Visit as a legitimate way to know schools, we will build a better way to judge and support schools. This new way of knowing schools challenges many of the paradigms that

underlie both how we study schools and how we try to "fix" them. This practitioner methodology could provide a new basis for:

Teachers to learn from and improve their practice,

Schools to understand their strengths and identify what they need to do to improve as institutions of learning,

State and district school systems to work so that their structures, mandates and procedures support, rather than antagonize, school practice,

Teacher colleges, professional development strategies and reform efforts to become connected effectively to actual school improvement,

The public to become engaged in a serious and continuous dialogue about the purpose of schools and about what parents and those outside of schools can do to help them carry out their complex and critical public purpose.

Since the Visit holds so much potential, we are required to carefully check it out.

Tom Wilson

Catalpa Ltd.
January 1999

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THE PURPOSE OF THE VISIT

We visit a school to gain knowledge about its practice as an institution. We do **not** visit a school to evaluate the performance of individual teachers or staff. A Visiting Team's recommendations normally refer to issues a school should consider.

For more than 150 years the English have been clear that the Visit must first focus on teaching and learning. While American accreditation has only recently articulated this focus, its underlying concern has always been to see how well a school is serving its students. There is almost universal agreement that what matters most in learning is what actually takes place between a teacher and a student; not how a teacher talks about teaching or for that matter how anyone else writes or talks about teaching.

The details of what people actually do in their daily work are what matters most in other practitioner professions.

The Visit relies on what practitioners know and value. Practitioners, particularly teachers, have the dominant voice.

The Team 's conclusions simultaneously provide some measure of accountability with some measure of support for improvement at a school. While there will always be debate about the appropriate balance between support and accountability, when the purpose for the Visit comes down in favor of one at the exclusion of the other, a critical component of the method for knowing schools is lost.

At some basic level the Visit considers the public interest in the education of children.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE VISIT

A Visit happens when people who are not from a place deliberately go there to experience it and try to understand what is actually happening there. It is natural for Visitors to conclude what that place is like, based on what they see, hear and think while they are there. All Visit protocols contain some ritual elements. These are not irrelevant to the purpose of generating knowledge. A Visit is a visit, after all.

The first section of the Handbook describes some of the key characteristics of the Visit, as a methodology for knowing a school. Subsequent sections describe the elements of the inquiry process and the procedures for using the Visit methodology well.

Examining the dynamics of a particular school.

The Team studies the actual institutional life of a school and its classrooms. In addition to artifacts of its life, which the school has prepared (e.g. its Self-Study), the Team considers what teachers, students, staff, parents and others in the school are actually doing within the boundaries of the school. This includes what people do, what they say and what they intend their actions and words to mean. During the Visit, the Team deliberately does **not** evaluate how teachers or school staff are performing.

Everything the Team considers is from the actual context of the school:

People representing a range of the major school constituencies (students, teachers, administrators, other school staff, district administrators and parents)

Documents about the school

Events and **incidents**, usual and unusual, including special events planned by the school for the Team: usual (e.g., a regular faculty meeting), unusual (e.g., an unplanned fire drill), and planned (e.g., Team members meet parents to discuss the school)

The usual daily buzz of **talk** and other **sounds**

Conversations and **discussions:** usual (e.g. in a classroom), unusual (e.g. students discussing who pulled the fire alarm) and special (e.g.

members of the school's Self Study committee recalling for the Team the steps they went through as a group)

When the primary focus is on teaching and learning, Team members will spend a considerable part of their time in the classroom.

If they are to draw valid conclusions about what they see and hear, Team members must carefully consider and discuss the meaning of particular incidents they see. The Team must build its conclusions about the life of the school, not describe it.

What a Team concludes about a school is directly based on what it has learned about the life of that school during the actual time of its Visit.

Implications

Since the Team's conclusions about the school are based on the evidence it draws from the actual life of the school, it must build these conclusions during the Visit.

If school participants know that what the Team concludes will be based on evidence that comes directly from the life of the school, they will usually find these conclusions easier to engage, than those that are based on more indirect and opaque measures of the school's performance.

The Visit requires the Team to have a prior understanding of the substantive areas it will examine.

While the substance of what the Team considers may vary, Team members must have a clear, prior understanding of what area or areas of substance the Team will examine. If the school fully understands what these substantive areas are and why they are the focus of the Visit, the Team will be more effective in coming to know that school.

Many Visit protocols, including those associated with American accreditation, use standards to set out the substantive areas of a Visit. The purpose of these Visits often becomes to assess how well the school is meeting these standards.

The knowledge gained from the Visit is about the quality of practice in a particular school. This knowledge is directly useful for deciding accountability and support, because it is presented as conclusions about school quality and as recommendations for its improvement.

A Visit is not an *investigation* of something that happened in the school before the Visit.

The Visit is well suited to study the quality of teaching and learning provided by a school.

During a Visit, a Team can focus on teaching and learning, as complex phenomena actually taking place in the particular classrooms of a school. This focus has always been at the heart of the English School Visit.

The Visit is a team enterprise.

To make sense of the day-to-day life of a school and to generate legitimate knowledge about that during a short period of time, three or more Visitors, who share a clear and common purpose, must go to the school.

The majority of Team members (but, not all) must be general school practitioners. For example, if there is a strong focus on how well teaching is done, they should be practicing teachers. If the focus is on school management, then a majority should be managers (principals).

The quality of the outcome of a Visit depends on the practitioner judgments of individual Team members, i.e. their skills, the standards they hold and their curiosity. The qualities in individual Team members will shape what the Team sees and what it concludes from what it sees. Since the written conclusions must pass the muster of Team discussion and the decisions must be made by Team consensus, the quality and veracity of the Team's conclusions are guaranteed.

The method of the Visit is profoundly social. The nature of the interaction within the Team and between the Team and the school it is visiting will directly effect the value of the Team's conclusions.

The schedule of the Visit is arranged in advance. Both the school and the Team know when the Team will be present in the school and what its schedule of activities will be.

While the principal may make some exceptions, the school agrees that the Team will have full access to school facilities and to its staff. School staff cannot enter the assigned Team workroom without first consulting the Team Chair. Team members cannot enter faculty lounges without the express invitation of a faculty member.

Implications

The Visit is about the quality of the school's daily performance of its work. When the school faculty and staff prepare for a Visit, it is only natural for them to want to perform their best. The Visit provides an opportunity for the school, as well as the Team, to see how good the school can be. That does not prevent the Team from seeing the "real life" of a school or from judging its quality correctly.

Since the Visit is a social event, there is a mistaken idea that the school will perform for the Team in a way that would make its conclusions unreliable. To an important extent school people do control what a Team learns during its Visit. They can also limit the Team's understanding of the existing links between what Team members actually see and what they do not see. They may influence less observable factors, including the history of the school, its funding or its relationship to the school district. Thus, a positive atmosphere of reciprocal understanding and respect between the Visitors and the Visited will make a difference in the quality and utility of what the Team learns.

Teams of seasoned practitioners are seldom fooled by artificial shows. For example: a teacher, who teaches her one stellar lesson while a Team member is visiting her classroom; a principal, who is unusually concerned about the welfare of a student only when observed by a Team member; a school planning team that puts an excessively positive spin on their work. A Team can learn much from a façade created by a school that the school may not want it to learn.

Because the Visit is a social event, Team members must to agree to a Code of Conduct about how they will behave during the Visit. Likewise, the school supports the Visit, when it pays careful attention to the logistical details related to the fact that a group of Visitors will be on site. Providing an adequate and private workroom for the Team and being clear about how coffee and meals will be arranged are two critical elements.

Since the Visit is a social event, it is easy to conclude that its design and implementation must first concern social and group processes. When these are the only processes that are considered, the Visit has not been understood as a methodology for knowing a school. Today's educators easily make this mistake, as the espoused value of good group process dominates the values of educational action research, professional development, democratic leadership and planning approaches.

A written report is the culminating activity of the Visit.

The Visit is a deliberate and planned exercise. That the Team will produce a written report at the conclusion of the Visit directly and clearly indicates the purpose of the Visit to school, the Team and the public. This report is an integral part of the Team's deliberations. If conclusions are included in the report, the Team members must reach reasonable consensus about their findings.

The report provokes and persuades; it does not prescribe.

The Team report does not trigger an automatic executive decision about what should change at the school. The Team report provides both the school and

the public with conclusions about issues in a way that will provoke action that supports improvement.

The Team honors the integrity of the school by not prescribing specific action in its final report. The method of the Visit works better if the Team identifies problems that compromise the school's quality, than if it proposes solutions. A school can more easily see its problems from the perspective of an outside group. The method of the Visit recognizes that the knowledge and perspective of insiders is more useful in building solutions, as these are tied to the necessary and familiar critical details within the dynamic of the institution that are necessary to bring about change. This separation between Visit and Visitor, between those who recommend and those who act, requires the Team to write persuasively about what it thinks is happening at a school and to identify the issues they think the school should best address.

The Team disbands after it has completed its report. The school and those responsible for the school then consider the report and decide what to do. (It exceeds the purpose of this document to consider carefully how schools and their decision-makers will use the reports.)

When a Team concludes a Visit, its members usually have come to care a great deal about the school. They want to be sure that what they say will be useful to the school and the children it serves.

The Team is temporary. It disbands at the end of the Visit.

The Team is a temporary group. Different Teams are often drawn from the same pool of trained Visitors, but a particular Team does not stay together after it has completed a Visit.

This has one important positive result. After the Visit everyone concerned with the school must focus on the report. There is no Team to question or blame. While it is certainly legitimate for a school to question or even refute a report, it must do so based on its content, not on the characteristics of the group who wrote it.

The time-limited nature of the Visit serves as an important discipline for the Team. A Team must come to its conclusions quickly and on site, increasing the likelihood that those conclusions will be connected to the actual dynamics of the school.

The Visit is predisposed to help the school, as well as to monitor it.

When the essential characteristics of the Visit are considered, it becomes clear that the Visit both monitors and supports schools.

Characteristics that support monitoring include:

The Visit provides the perspectives of outside practitioners;

The Team holds its discussions in private;

The Visit is most often based on standards that are external to the school;

Teams often represent an agency (accrediting association or government funding agency), whose decisions about the quality of the school will make a difference to the school.

Characteristics of the Visit that support school improvement include:

The Team's conclusions are connected to actual practice at the school;

The Team generates conclusions, rather than descriptions, about a school's practice. It is much easier to tie action to conclusions than to description;

The Team's conclusions and recommendations are tailored to the particular school that is under consideration;

The strong practitioner presence on the Team makes the Team disposed to help other practitioners do their better work;

There is usually an expectation that the Team has a professional responsibility to write conclusions that will strengthen a school as an institution so that it can provide the best professional practice possible.

It is critical to maintain both monitoring and supporting in a Visit protocol. This will strengthen the Team's ability to generate significant knowledge about how well the school works. Maintaining an effective tension between these will require a shift in the common belief that monitoring and support are by their very nature separate. Americans tend to believe that external information is necessary for external monitoring and that supporting the internal life of a school requires manipulation of its internal process. The Visit methodology posits that it is most effective and efficient to do both at the same time. Good information and knowledge about a school makes that possible.

THE CENTRAL ELEMENTS OF THE VISIT INQUIRY

The Visit is best described as a method of inquiry that generates knowledge about how well a school is functioning. It is not a planning process that results in a plan, or a group process that results in outcomes (e.g. members of a Team working better together as a Team) or an administrative procedure that is marked by completed specified steps.

The methodology of the Visit takes advantage of the particular characteristics of a Visit. Attention to these elements is necessary, if one is to realize the potential of the methodology for generating knowledge of value.

The Central Elements of the Visit Inquiry are:

Initial Observations and Perceptions

Evidence

Conclusions

Professional Judgment

Team Discussion and Decision Making

Recommendations

The Team Report

These form the heart of the process.

Initial Observations and Perceptions

Team members use their initial personal perceptions of the school as stepping stones to enter into the deliberative process of their work, i.e., to distill evidence and to construct agreed upon conclusions. As soon as they hear about the school, read about it or arrive at the site, they absorb information and begin their individual observations. They may keep these to themselves; they often do. The observations shared with the Team form the initial content and structure of the Team's discussion. As the Team learns more about the

school, many of these personal observations are discarded by the individual Team members or later by the Team.

Recognizing the place of initial observations and perceptions of individual Team members makes the method of the Visit clearer to Team members, as well as to school people.

Evidence

In the beginning evidence is what individual Team members observe about the nature and/or value of teaching and learning practice at the school. Evidence is what ties the Team's inquiry to the actual life of the school. Teams must be instructed to use only evidence that exists in the school during the time of the Visit. Hearsay evidence is excluded.

Sources of evidence include: what individual Team members observe of school practice, classroom practice and institutional dynamics; their examination of school documents (with special attention to any Self-Study document prepared for the Visit), test scores; their interviews with school participants or constituents; and their conversations with people from the school.

A piece of evidence should be simply described at the level of detail necessary for Team members to understand. Any Team member can and should challenge any piece of evidence.

The Team must reach consensus agreement that a piece of evidence is accurate before it can be used to support a conclusion in the report. When a Team comes to this agreement, the nature of the evidence changes from the dynamic, working evidence that is so critical to the Team's deliberations to the final evidence that is static and that supports a public conclusion.

Conclusions

The Team's conclusions are at the heart of the inquiry process. They are constructed from the other inquiry elements – evidence, judgment, Team discussion and agreement. They precede the Team's recommendations.

It is critical to understand the reciprocal relationship between evidence and conclusions. While the Team must base its conclusions on evidence, it must also delineate evidence, particularly when considering whether or not a conclusion is accurate.

A conclusion does not simply describe a feature of the school. A conclusion does not simply describe the evidence. Evidence does not simply justify a conclusion. The Team's judgment binds them together.

Any Team member may propose a conclusion for Team discussion. The Team does not vote upon these proposals, but fully discusses them until it comes to a consensus agreement that the conclusion is valid and certain. In the process of this discussion, the Team may well decide to collect additional evidence to

strengthen the conclusion. The Team may go back and forth between considering conclusions and collecting evidence before it reaches final consensus agreement. Sometimes the Team will drop a conclusion, but most often Team discussion results in shaping a better conclusion than the one originally proposed.

Thus, the process of reaching conclusions is an on-going and reciprocal process among Team members, the school and the Team as a whole. The conclusions, which the individual Team members and the Team, as a whole, decide to discuss, will contribute directly to the Team's process of identifying what it believes are the most important conclusions to make.

As it comes to agreement and before it reports a conclusion, the Team must consider three issues:

1. Is it a conclusion? Does it represent the judgment of the whole Team?
2. Is it supported by two pieces of evidence that the whole Team accepts?
3. Is the Team convinced that the conclusion will be effective in leading to improvement for student learning and welfare at that school?

In order to make its final report as effective as possible for a school the Team must limit the number of its conclusions.

Professional Judgment

The Team's conclusions are based on the judgment of its individual members, which rests in each one's professional knowledge and standards for practice. These may or may not be the formal standards and criteria of the Visit protocol. Individual Team members must build shared criteria and knowledge for making Team judgments and decisions. These shared criteria are more likely to be in close alignment with the criteria of the Visit protocol.

The Team must make professional judgments about how well a school is doing, what evidence it will accept, what conclusions are important for it to reach, and how best to word its recommendations to push a school's practice forward.

When making judgments, Team members will frequently disagree. If both the Chair and the members of the Team understand the importance of professional judgment, these disagreements will become a productive part of Team discussion.

Most effective Teams will reach a level of agreement about the Team's perception of the school, based on its corporate judgment. When this happens, the Team will become not only much more efficient in considering evidence

and conclusions, but also more articulate about what is most important to be said about the school.

Professional judgment is critical and legitimate in all professions when one is deciding the quality of action. Professional judgment is the critical element that makes the Visit different from research and investigation. Only the Visit rests clearly on the professional judgment of school practitioners about actual school practice. When the legitimacy and importance of professional judgment is recognized, explicit and cultivated, the Visit generates the best information. This recognition allows the Team to take full responsibility for its conclusions.

Team Discussion and Decisions

Evidence and conclusions shape Team discussion. The Team as a whole decides what finally will be written. How well the Team handles its own discussion and decision making will influence how accurate and useful its report will be.

It is necessary to establish explicit procedures, understood by all Team members, for how the Team will consider evidence, reach conclusions and come to agreement. It is a major responsibility of the Chair to insure that these procedures are followed.

The Team should reach reasonable consensus on all recommendations, conclusions, evidence, and directions it will pursue, as well as on how to word the conclusion so that it will be most effective.

The Team must avoid the temptation to resolve differences between its members by simple bargaining — "I will agree with you about this, if you will agree with me about that."

Recommendations (commendations)

Team recommendations for improvement (or commendations marking strengths) tie its conclusions back to the real life of the school.

Recommendations are the pay-off for the school, as well as for the Team. Even if a Team has come to good conclusions about a school, the school will be find the results frustrating or irrelevant unless good recommendations follow.

If both the school and the Team know up-front that the Team's report will include recommendations, this will directly influence the Team's ability to learn about the school. Since the Visit makes schools vulnerable and since the school has some control over what a Team can learn, it is critical for the school to have good reason to believe that it will benefit from the Visit. A school sees the possibility of receiving useful recommendations, shaped according to what is actually happening at the time of the Visit, as a benefit

that goes beyond what they normally expect from testing and other accountability procedures.

That the Team is required to recreate recommendations, based on its conclusions, clarifies the purpose of the Visit to the Team. This in turn increases the Team's commitment to work in a deliberate and disciplined manner with the other elements on which the recommendations are based.

The Team must base every recommendation on a conclusion, although every conclusion does not require a recommendation.

Since the Visit is geared to consider the particular shape of the life of a school, the Team should strengthen its recommendations by tailoring them to its knowledge of that particular school.

The best recommendations do not prescribe detailed action. By avoiding prescriptive recommendations, the Team honors the integrity of the school and acknowledges the limitations of the Visit as a method.

The Team's Report

The Team report is not a simple summation of what the Team has decided. It is a part and parcel of the inquiry process. When writing the report, the Team is required to check carefully and confirm its agreement on evidence, conclusions and recommendations. The Team must pay close attention to the report wording and to the total message it will give the reader, particularly a reader from the school.

The Team report is the only product of the Visit. The quality of the finished report not only determines the usefulness of the Visit for the school, but the public's view of the legitimacy of the Visit, the value of the Team's work and the value of the Visit process, as well.

The report template, which the Team must know before the Visit, must require a short, coherent and clear content.

Connections between the Central Elements

The following points summarize the skeletal structure that connects the Central Elements.

> A Team may make only recommendations that are tied to its conclusions.
>
> The Team builds its conclusions from evidence that was seen or heard by the individual Team members at the site during the Visit.
>
> The glue and grease of the process is what the Team judges to be important and "good enough," and what it finds that provides coherence for a particular site.

The Team moderates, and decides by consensus what its conclusions are, what its evidence is, what it should consider, what its recommendations are and what its report will say.

THE SUBSTANTIVE FOCUS

A Team will perform best, if the substantive focus for the Visit is clear, limited and understood by all Team members before the Team goes to the school. During the Visit the Team will talk about and inquire about established substantive areas of focus. The Team will write its conclusions about how well a school is performing in a focus area.

In addition, the focus areas will largely determine what the Team members will do during the Visit: e.g., examine documents, interview students, visit classrooms, follow a student for a day, scrutinize the Self Study, interview administrators, observe the cafeteria, listen to parents, analyze test-score results, etc. A protocol that stresses the quality of teaching and learning will lead to different Team activities (e.g. Visiting classrooms) than one that stresses the importance of the school's collaborative agreements (e.g. observing a meeting of the partners).

STANDARDS

When good professional practice is central to an institution's purpose, standards of practice become accepted and critical for improving its performance. The accountability of public institutions, including public schools, is usually based on standards. Applying standards to schools has contributed to the public legitimacy of accreditation over the years.

Historically the Visit in American education was shaped by accreditation, as a way to check out how well a school meets standards set by a particular association or government agency. The Visit commonly is seen as an administrative process that "validates" a school's own statements about how well it meets these standards. It is also used to see if prescriptive regulations have been followed by the institution. The Visit can be much more than that.

The key is how standards are defined for the Visiting Team so that its method of inquiry is strengthened. Standards can provide useful clear areas of focus for the Team. But when in the name of precision or objectivity they become the framework for what the Team is supposed to see, this controls or circumscribes the judgment of the Team. When the Team is asked to set

aside or distort its own judgment and see the school only from the vantage point of the standard, rather than from how well the school's actual standards are functioning, this limits the potential value of the Visit as a method.

Requiring a Team to respond to too many standards (or parts of standards) can result in limiting the legitimacy of the Visit by forcing the Team to sort out the standards, rather than to sort out the school.

In the words of a wise English inspector, a Team member should "Know what he sees, rather than see what he knows."

THE DYNAMIC OF THE INQUIRY

PHASES

Phases are the critical time intervals that mark the Visit process. The Team usually moves through these four phases:

The Team engages the school and takes up its task

Meeting members of the Team
Meeting the people at the School
Reading the School's Self-Study document
Learning what the Team needs to do

The Team gathers evidence by

Observing the school's classrooms and the school, as a whole
Reviewing school documents (Particularly the Self Study)
Conversing formally and informally with school participants

The Team considers the evidence and constructs its conclusions and recommendations (and commendations) from the evidence

Team discussion is central for checking evidence and building conclusions from that evidence. Once the process has begun it continues in informal conversations between and among members of the Team.

The Team writes the report

Writing the report is a critical phase of the Visit. Unlike a report of an experiment or an investigation, it does not report an event. The Team as a whole writes the report, while the Team is still at the school. The effectiveness of the report depends in part on how well it reflects a strong Team voice.

The fact that the Team is required to write a report shapes how it decides to go about its work and what it will observe. Writing the

report overlaps with considering evidence, even with collecting it. The report shapes these phases, as much as what happens during these phases shapes what goes into the report. Since the report is a definite product and a public statement, the act of writing it provides an important source of rigor and a touchstone of reality to the Team.

The four phases of the Visit are not discrete. A Team moves through them in the order indicated. But they overlap in myriad and complex ways. The Visit methodology would be incomplete and defective, if one of them were excluded.

THREE QUESTIONS

These three questions push the Team's inquiry:

1. What is going on here?
2. What does that say or mean about this school?
3. What should the school do about it?

DISCREPANCIES

The process of the Visit pushes a Team to pursue discrepancies it finds in the evidence it gathers and in its understanding of the school. Common sources of discrepancies are:

Things are not what they seem; e.g., a school says one thing in its Self-Study and the Team sees another.

There is conflicting evidence.

The Team is puzzled either by the evidence, or by its initial conclusions.

The Team disagrees about whether evidence is accurate or about what conclusion best explains the evidence.

Discrepancies shape where the Team chooses to place its focus. They shape the Team's decisions about what evidence to pursue and what conclusions to strive toward.

Attempts to limit the possibility of discrepancies (e.g. creating checklists of what the Team members should see) will limit the value of the Team's conclusions. While it is not effective to try to control the contradictions that exist within the Team's understanding of the school, it is possible to ensure that the Team has a shared understanding of its task before it visits the school. Divergence that is due to a lack of clarity about its purpose, focus and task is harmful to the Team's productivity.

PROCEDURES FOR RIGOR

The following procedures for conducting the Visit strengthen the rigor, legitimacy and utility of what the Team concludes and recommends.

The Team and Its Members

1. Individual Team members must have neither a fiduciary relationship nor a conflict of interest with the school.

2. Although both the organizational complexity and the size of a school will determine the size of the Team, no Team should have fewer than three members.

3. When selecting the Team, consideration must be given to the particular practitioner knowledge of its members to assure that they match the areas of the Team's focus. If the emphasis is on teaching and learning, teachers must be the majority, but not its only members. If the emphasis is on special needs students, Team members must represent those who work with students who have special needs.

4. Each Team member must agree to a public code of conduct for the Visit. It is critical that the Team must treat all information it gathers as confidential. To that same end Team members must agree that they will allow the Team report to speak for them.

5. The Team Chair is responsible for the Team's adherence to the method. Thus, the Chair must have a good working knowledge of the methodology of the Visit. The Chair should be viewed as being a fair and reasonable person, who knows schools well, who writes reasonably well and who is able to complete a rigorous task with a sense of proportion and, hopefully, with good humor.

Considering Evidence and Constructing Conclusions

1. When collecting evidence and drawing conclusions, Team members work as a deliberate unit.
2. Team discussion must center on building conclusions from evidence. Team members pay deliberate attention to the requirement that conclusions must be supported by evidence that has been sanctified by everyone's agreement.
3. The Team's judgments and conclusions are about the practice of the school as an institution, not about the performance of individual faculty or staff.
4. Evidence exists in the school during the Visit. Hearsay is not allowed.
5. Team members are encouraged to seek evidence to either confirm or refute proposed conclusions. The Team can control how to shape this aspect of collecting evidence. The school must be open to probes by the Team.
6. The decisions about what constitutes evidence, conclusions, and recommendations rest fully with the Team. The Team must reach its decisions by consensus.
7. The Team is afforded considerable, unfettered and confidential discussion.

The Team Report

1. Integral to the deliberative process, the Team's final written report must be substantively complete before the Team leaves the school.
2. The report is about the particular school under examination. The Team decides what is most important for it to say.
3. The protocol should provide a clear and simple template for the report. This includes the standards outside the school, or other major issues the Team is required to address.
4. After the report is finished, the Team summarizes what it believes are the most important things to be said about that school at that time in a one-paragraph *Portrait of the School.* This is usually placed near the beginning of the report. It provides a center and coherence to the more specific conclusions and recommendations that follow. The report lists the sources of evidence the Team has used. The brief report is written in clear language that avoids description.

5. No administrative action is required or directly tied to the conclusions of the report. The Team must work to make its report persuasive for the school participants, as well as for others who are responsible for deciding action.

6. The report is not a draft that can be negotiated by the school or by anyone else. After the Team disbands the Chair may edit the report for clarity only or to correct obvious errors of fact. When editing the report, the Chair is charged to represent the Team's conclusions and intent.

7. The Team disbands when its work is done.

WHEN THE VISIT IS OVER

Since the Visit is an event that has made the school and the Team vulnerable, both need closure. The traditional closing ritual is for the Team Chair to meet with the school faculty to orally present the Team's main conclusions. The written report is processed later.

The nature of the Visit strongly suggests that the school should be required to respond to the report.